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# TRIGGER COURAGE

*EVER facing staggering odds, that deathless legion of stalwarts who carried law into the mesquite were called upon for a brand of courage far transcending the purely physical. Their job was more complicated than that of the renegades they chased. The outlaw had only to squeeze a trigger from the brush to insure his continued sway. But the statute prescribed that a lawman fetch his quarry to the noose, as a deterrent to kindred spirits. In the consummation of such a task, life frequently hung upon the wink of an eye-lash. Consider. . . .*

*Dawn below the Mexican Border . . . Three men hunkered beside a little campfire. One was Burt Alvord, renegade and former deputy sheriff, now wanted in Arizona for train robbery. Another was Bill Stiles, one-time outlaw who had joined the Rangers. The third was Augustine Chacon, killer and gunman lately escaped from Solomonville where he had been awaiting the noose.*

*Keeping his rendezvous, mayhap with death, Captain Burton Mossman of the Arizona Rangers rode into the camp, was introduced to Chacon by Alvord as an outlaw desirous of joining the band. Plans were quickly laid to raid the herd of thoroughbred horses at the Greene-Randolph ranch, seven miles north of the Border.*

*Nightfall found the four men near the scene of their project. But the pit-blackness of an overcast sky balked them. Camp was made in deep brush not far away. During the night, Burt Alvord crept to Mossman's side.*

*"I'm hightailin'," he whispered. "I done my part an' fetched him to yuh. You act scairt tuh glaum onto him. Have at him. An' if you make it stick, remember, half the reward is mine fer court expenses when I give myself up."*

*He was gone. Burton Mossman was alone with a deadly killer and a reformed renegade he dared not trust. Dawn came with Chacon suspicious of Alvord's unexplained absence and Bill Stiles wondering why Mossman hadn't killed the outlaw in his sleep; why he hadn't taken the easiest way out. Mossman was more than a little doubtful of how Stiles would side when the play came up.*

*When breakfast of toasted bacon was over Chacon averred he was soured on the raid and would return to Mexico. Shrugging, Mossman borrowed a black cigarette from the outlaw. From the fire he lifted a burning brand, lights his smoke. As he tossed the brand down, his fingers brushed his holster. His gun leaped to his hand.*

*"Up, Chacon! You've done yore last killin'!"*

*Mossman had Stiles and the outlaw both under his muzzle. The Mexican smiled icily, refusing to lift his hands.*

*"Que differencia?" he murmured. "What difference whether I die by the bullet or the rope?"*

*His eyes bored into Mossman's, unwinking, waiting for the ranger's lids to dip. So fast was he, that was all he needed to start his play. For what seemed an age, the two men duelled with their eyes. Mossman could have pressed the trigger and made an end to the test. But the noose was crying to exact payment for bullets in the back.*

*Now a pair of eyes flickered, dropped. They were the pit black orbs of Chacon, not the icy gray of Burton Mossman. The Ranger disarmed the killer. Chacon was a prisoner, already an example for those who would follow in his wild footsteps. Captain Burton Mossman had proved that gun courage lay not in a hair trigger. But rather in the ability to make the threat of lead more deadly than the promise of the law's payoff.*

*—TRAIL RIDER.*

By WALT COBURN
*(Author of "Feud Guns of Brady's Basin," etc.)*

# THE PARTNER OF

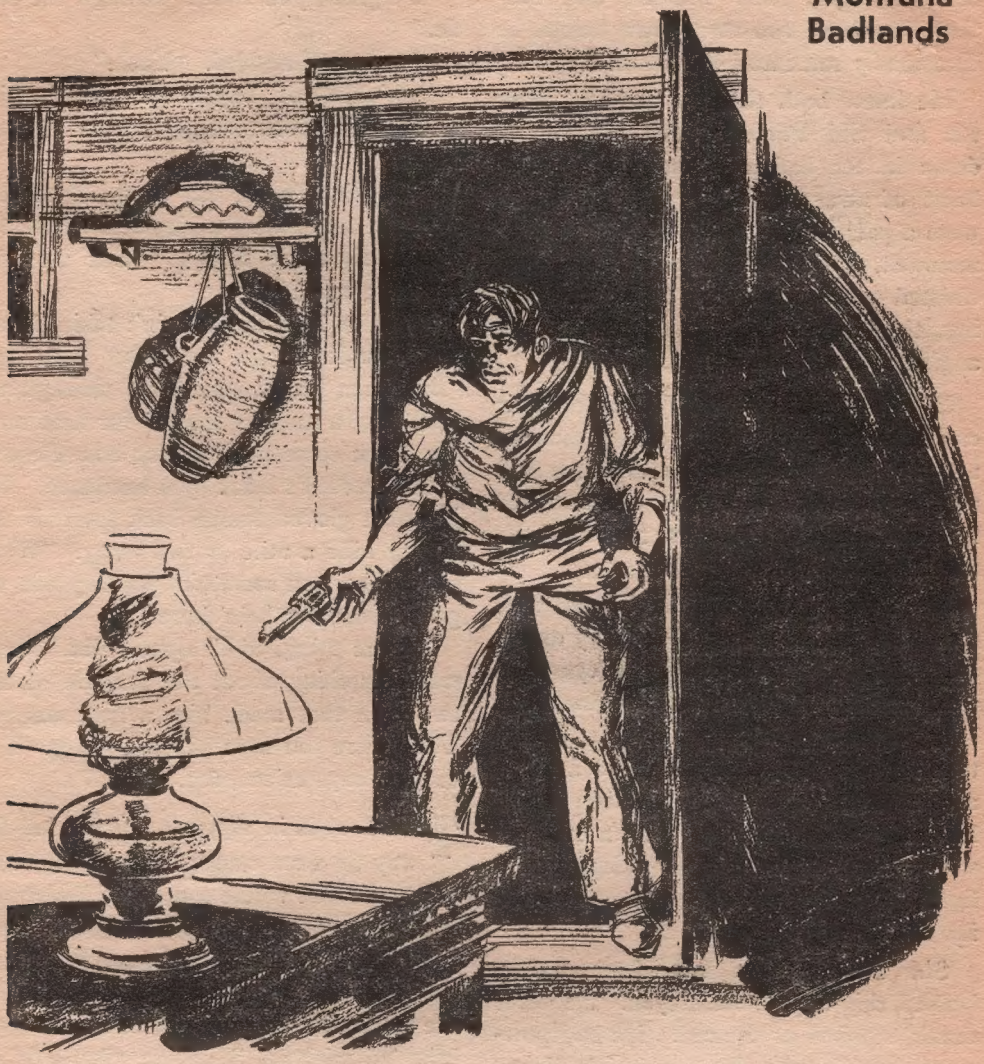
**Bill Benton and Buckshot Blue had been bunk-mates long before the rodeo smash-up which sent Buckshot, broken in body and spirit, alone and embittered, out on the dim, twisted trails. To Bill, Buckshot was still his partner—a man to ride the river with—though the rest of the range had branded him outlaw and killer!**

FROM the high rimrock on the side of Benton Butte, Bill Benton watched the two men below in the valley as they rode through the grazing cattle. He had been watching them for half an hour, waiting for them to do some roping and build a branding fire, or else cut out a small bunch of Benton cattle and haze them off into the rough country towards the badlands. But so far the two riders had made no bad move.

Bill Benton was on his way to the home

# BUCKSHOT BLUE

**A Novel of the Montana Badlands**



ranch. He had just come from the cowboy contest at Miles City and was bringing back about seven hundred dollars in prize money and money he had won making side bets. He was riding a brand new saddle. On the rear of the cantle was an engraved silver plate that said the saddle was presented to the champion bronc rider. The saddle creaked as his horse grazed, back in the scrub pines.

Bill was in his early twenties. He had sandy hair, blunt features deeply tanned, puckered eyes the color of the Montana skies after a rain. His mouth was wide, and when he grinned, and he grinned a lot, he showed a set of strong, white teeth. A cracker-jack cowman and a popular contestant at the rodeos, he was well liked on his home range in Montana, as well as he was at the big contests all over the country from Calgary, Canada, to Prescott, Arizona, and even once at the Madison Square Garden in New York and once at Chicago. He loved the game and he needed the money to keep his outfit from going broke. With bad prices for

beef, drought, hard winters, and rustlers like those two men down below, he occasionaly ran into hard times. . . .

He knew both those men. Ike Skelton and Sid Purcell. The SP spread down in the badlands and were in the habit of dragging hungry loops. They were a pair of fast cowboys, always well mounted, and even tougher than they claimed to be. And they hired hard-riding, tight-lipped men who knew all the angles of the game.

Bill watched them as they finished their careful inspection of the cattle, then he mounted his horse and rode down the trail to the floor of the valley. He crossed Beaver Creek and loped out to meet Skelton and Purcell.

Ike Skelton was a big, beefy man with the brick-red, puffy face of a heavy drinker. He had small light colored eyes that were always bloodshot. His nose had been broken. His mouth was heavy, thick lipped. He always needed a shave and a clean shirt. Despite his paunch, his weight, he was fast with a rope or with a gun. And he never sidestepped a fight. Men feared and respected the ability of Ike Skelton.

Sid Purcell was tall, lean, hawk-beaked, thin-lipped, black-eyed. He never drank, smoked or chewed. He had powerful, bony hands. He was a tight-lipped man when it came to talking, and never smiled. But men who knew claimed that Purcell was easier to get along with than Skelton who, when at certain stages of drunkenness, became offensive and abusive.

Bill Benton rode up to them. Sid Purcell nodded and looked at the new saddle.

Ike Skelton said, "H're yuh, Bill?"

"Kind of off your range, ain't you?" said Bill when he had given them a curt "howdy".

"Some," said Skelton.

"I sighted you lookin' through the cattle."

Sid Purcell nodded. "Yeah."

"Thinkin' of buyin' or just lookin' around? Window shoppin', as the women call it?"

"We ain't buyin' no Slash B cattle," said Skelton, rolling a cigarette deftly between his thick fingers. "But we was lookin' around."

"Just as long as you ain't takin' home any samples, I got no kick," Bill said. "But when I sight you lookin' through my cattle like a monkey lookin' for fleas on a cat, I got some right to ask how come?"

Sid Purcell's black eyes hardened. He jerked a gloved thumb back towards the rolling hills a mile or two away. "Want us to show you somethin' that'll prove we got reasons fer bein' here?"

"Shore thing, Sid," agreed Bill. There was something about the attitude of the two men that made him a little uneasy. They were too sure of themselves. Too damned mysterious, too.

THEY rode in silence. Purcell led the way up a cut coulee. There, dug from under the dirt where somebody had caved in a cutbank, was a fresh beef hide. Purcell spread it out. There was a large hole cut in the left side, another high up behind the flank. The Skelton-Purcell cattle were branded with an S on the ribs, a P on the thigh, high up near the critter's spine. The brands had been cut out.

"They butchered in the next coulee. Left nothin' but some blood and the grass from the stomach. Injun style," Skelton said.

"The reservation," said Bill Benton, "ain't more than a mile from here. It wouldn't be the first time the Injuns needed slow elk meat and done some moonlight butcherin'."

Ike Skelton shook his heavy, iron-gray head. "This ain't an Injun job. They might have helped. But what Injun around

here owns a .303 Savage rifle? This empty shell was near where they butchered. We follered the wagon tracks as far as the road. Lost 'em there. This beef was peddled in town. Some Moccasin butcher ain't too particular about seein' the hide that is supposed to be with the meat he buys. Don't you own a .303 Savage? One you traded a saloon man out of last Fall?"

"I own a gun like that and you know it," Bill answered coldly. "You tried to buy it from the saloon gent but wouldn't bid enough. But this hide is fresh. The butcherin' was done last night or the night before. I've been away for two weeks. Takin' in the Miles City show."

"Have the rifle with you?" asked the thin-lipped Purcell.

"You know damn' well I didn't," Bill snapped. "And what you're drivin' at is that somebody from the Slash B ranch did the butcherin'. That it?"

"We'll leave that to your judgment. You know we got no proof. But any man's 'titled to his own opinion."

"Providin'," replied Bill Benton, "that he don't go runnin' off at the head too much." He looked hard at Skelton.

"When I run off at the head," said the burly man, "I'll have proof to back what I'm sayin'. And I won't say it unless you or that pardner of yourn is there to listen. But I'm tellin' you now, young feller, one of our steers has bin butchered on your range. Me and Sid ain't the kind that call in the law. But by God we'll ride this range any damned time we please."

"Better have the law with you," said Bill Benton grimly, "if you do any night ridin'. I'm not scared of you—neither is my pardner, Buckshot Blue. I reckon you both have had proof of that. The last time you tackled Buckshot, Skelton, you had to get fitted for some store teeth. And get a nose patched up. So, gents, when you start that butcherin' subject in town, get old Doc Brady sobered up. You'll need him."

Ike Skelton's face had purpled. Sid Purcell's thin-lipped mouth twitched in what might have been a smile. That whipping Buckshot Blue had handed Ike was a sore subject with the big cowman. . . .

AS BILL BENTON rode along home he tried to forget that this butcherin' business and the empty .303 shell bothered him. Hell, there were other rifles of that make and calibre in the country. And after all, they had not shown him the empty shell.

A few miles and he was in a better humor. He was going home to the ranch where he had been born and raised. The ranch his father, Ben Benton, had located back in '65, there in the valley at the foot of the Little Rockies. Bill knew every foot of this range, had ridden it on dark nights in a blizzard, more than once, and had never gotten lost. He could always find his way to the home ranch.

Bill hardly remembered his mother. He was too young when she died. Ben had been father and mother to him. Had taught him the cattle business from all angles. Bill was running the outfit when he was seventeen, handling horses and cattle and men and making a top job of it. Old Ben had been almighty proud of his son. He had wanted to leave to a son the biggest outfit in Montana.

But that hard winter of '86 had broken him, even as it had broken many another big cowman—even as it broke the back of the Montana cow country. When the Chinook came it was too late to save the cow country. Spring found the coulees, the ridges, the flats, covered with the carcasses of dead horses and cattle.

Ben Benton, like other big cowmen, was broke. It hadn't broken the fighting heart of that old pioneer Indian fighter. He started all over again, but he never was

able to make it back. He had to lose some of his land to buy more cattle. But he never quit. He hung and rattled with the school teacher he married. Together they worked and did their best to make an outfit out of the broken remnants. But when Bill was born, the Slash B was only a small outfit, as cow outfits are counted where there is plenty of open range.

Bill was nineteen when his father was found shot in the back. He had sold some cattle and had been paid cash which he was riding to town to deposit in the bank. There was no money on his person when the body was found. And the killer had never been apprehended. The murder remained a mystery.

Bill managed to make the outfit pay until bad prices, some dry summers, and three hard winters almost wiped him out. He borrowed what money he could from the bank, hired an honest man to run the spread, and started to play the rodeos around the country. Bill Benton was a natural born bronc rider and one of the fastest ropers in the cow country, north or south. And he knew how to save what he earned.

At Calgary he threw in with a tall cowboy named Harry Blue. Buckshot Blue, they called him, and he made a good running mate for Bill Benton. Buckshot was a sure, fast roper, a good bronc rider and a good bulldogger. And he stayed sober enough not to blow his chances.

Tall, dark, with black hair and dark gray eyes under straight black brows, he looked like he might have some Indian blood in his veins. Women called him the handsomest cowboy in the country, but it had never seemed to swell Buckshot Blue's head to any extent. And while his hot temper had made him enemies, still most men liked him.

Bill and Buckshot had pooled their bets. They worked together, split their winnings, and were known as the fastest team tiers in the contest game. Buckshot bought a half interest in the Slash B. And for three or four years they made it pay. Then a horse turned over on Buckshot and smashed hell out of his right shoulder. A drunken doctor had done a bad job of bone setting. When the bones had knit the shoulder was stiff. Buckshot could not raise his hand as high as his hat. His roping days were over. That was a year or more ago.

Buckshot had taken his injury hard. He had ridden to town to kill the doctor, but the man had quit the country. Buckshot Blue didn't show up at the ranch for a week. When he did show up he was almost too drunk to sit his horse and he had two gallon jugs of whiskey on the saddle. It was the first drop of whiskey that had ever been on the Slash B ranch, because Ben Benton, though he took an occasional drink in town and did not mind other men drinking, would not allow the stuff at home. Whiskey, he claimed, didn't mix with work and it bred trouble. Ben had handed down that ruling to his son. But when the bitter-eyed Buckshot showed up with two jugs, Bill didn't have the heart to start a quarrel. After all, the ranch was half Buckshot's.

After that there was always a jug of whiskey in Buckshot's room. And sometimes the tall cowboy would get drunk. But not too often, for there was work to do.

Buckshot ran the ranch while Bill made the rodeos. Buckshot would not go near a rodeo. He wouldn't even carry a rope on his saddle. Bill understood. It was hell. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### Prodigal's Homecoming

BEN BENTON had built the big log house during his prosperous days, before the winter of '86 smashed him.

He had spared no expense in its construction. It was built of the best of logs, with good floors, and a big porch that ran around three sides of the house. There was a big living room with an enormous stone fireplace that burned cordwood, and four bedrooms, a kitchen and dining room. It was now equipped with modern plumbing and the big porch had been screened in.

It was after supper time when Bill Benton got to the ranch. He put his horse in the barn. Then he went on to the house. He found Buckshot Blue in the big living room playing poker with three men whom he recognized as being three prominent citizens of Moccasin. There was Doc Arnold and his brother Slick, who owned the saloon and gambling house and honkey-tonk named the Antlers. With them was a cattle and a horse buyer named Drake, whose reputation as an honest man would not bear too close a scrutiny. The room was heavy with cigar and cigarette smoke. There was the odor of whiskey and stale beer. Empty bottles and broken glass littered the fine old Navajo rugs. Buckshot was drunk. The cattle buyer's heavy face was red and his eyes were puffed and bloodshot. But the lean-faced, long-fingered sallow-complexioned Doc and Slick Arnold were sober enough.

There was a glint of defiance in Buckshot Blue's eyes as he looked up from his poker hand.

"Didn't expect you back till next week, Bill."

"Decided to skip the Billings show. How's everything, Buck?" Bill Benton tried to keep his tone even.

Buckshot grinned faintly. "Just like you see it. You know these boys here."

"Shore. H'are yuh?" His tone was flat. No welcome showed in his eyes.

"We drove out to knock down a few prairie chickens and ducks," volunteered Drake.

"Hope you're havin' good luck," said Bill, and went on through and down the hall to his room. Inside he was boiling with anger. What right had Buck to ask those crooks out here and make a damned saloon and gambling joint out of the Slash B ranch. It was a wonder they didn't fetch some of their dance hall girls and do the job right. Make a damned road house out of the place!

Somehow Bill Benton always thought of the house as belonging to his father. His mother had lived here. It had been their home. Bill had been born in this house. Buckshot had no right to do what he was doing, drunk or sober.

BILL went back to the kitchen. A wrinkled little old Chinaman grinned a welcome. There was joy in his bright brown eyes.

"How long has that game been goin' on, Wong?" Bill asked.

"One night, one day. Damn hell."

"The old gent must be turnin' over in grave."

"You betcha. Damn hell."

Bill walked on back to the living room. Buckshot, who had been talking, broke off in the middle of a sentence.

"Have a drink, Bill."

Bill Benton, a little white around the lips, ignored Buckshot and the proffered drink. His eyes took in the two Arnolds and Drake.

"The game is over. Cash in and push back your chairs." Bill's voice was cold. "Hook up your buggy team and get to hell off this ranch. Don't ever come back. Get out."

"By God," gritted Buckshot, kicking back his chair. "Who in hell do you think you are, anyhow. I got an interest in this place. I asked these men here. They don't have to go till they damn please. I've stood about all I can take of your

Sunday School ways. For two cents I'd knock you plumb through the wall."

"You can't do it and you know you can't," Bill came back quietly. "You're drunk, Buck. You're makin' whiskey talk. You and I will settle this when you sober up in the mornin'. These damned tinhorn sports are draggin' it. If they don't get out, I'll throw 'em out. I'm givin' 'em five minutes to clear out. If they're still in this room, I'll do some house cleanin'."

Bill Benton walked back to his room. He hadn't meant to make it so tough on Buck but the play had come up that way. Buck was going to make a hell of a row, like as not, after his friends had left. And Bill didn't want trouble with his partner. He thought a lot of Buckshot Blue.

He heard the two gamblers and the beefy cattle buyer leave the house. Heard their voices as they went to the barn, and some minutes later Bill heard them drive away in Drake's rig. He went back to the big living room and opened the door and windows to air the place out. Later on, old Wong would clean up the mess.

Buck didn't come back from the barn. Bill reckoned he must have gone to town with the others. It was dark now. Bill went on to the barn to make sure the few horses they kept up were fed and watered. He lit the lantern that hung by a peg near the saddle room.

In the middle of the dirt floor sat Buckshot Blue. Across his lap was Bill's new saddle. The prize saddle. Its leather had been cut to shreds. Buckshot sat there, the long bladed stock-knife in his hand, a terrible, twisted look on his white face, blind tears coursing down his cheeks. He was swaying a little, to and fro, and from his twisted mouth came a muttered jumble of incoherent words. He did not recognize Bill.

Bill approached warily, not knowing what the man would do with that knife, loco as he was from bad whiskey.

But Buckshot made no effort at resistance when Bill twisted the knife away, closed it, and put it in his own pocket. Then he half-dragged, half carried his partner to the house and put him to bed. Buckshot's face looked greenish in the lamplight. His eyes were glassy, staring, smeared with hot tears. His twitching mouth kept muttering. Bill tied him to the bed. He had seen men go loco from booze, like maniacs, abnormally strong and dangerous. These past months of brooding, kept inside the man, might break out in a disastrous violence. The ruined saddle at the barn might be a warning signal.

SICK at heart, Bill went back to the living room. Old Wong was already cleaning up, muttering Chinese imprecations of some sort as he labored. Old Wong, who had worked here since long before that fatal winter of '86, worshipped Bill, whom he had helped raise. And he took little trouble to conceal his celestial dislike for Buckshot Blue.

"Heap hogs. Damn hell. Alle time ketchum dlunk. Damn hell. You likeee suppah now, maybe?"

"I'll grab a bite later on," Bill answered listlessly. "Don't feel hungry."

He looked at the litter of broken glass, cigar butts, empty bottles, cigarette stubs that had burned holes in the rugs. It was small wonder that Wong, neater than most women housekeepers, was on the verge of tears of wrath and grief. Now and then, as if appealing to them for moral support, his doglike brown eyes looked up at the two crayon portraits of Bill's father and mother in their huge gilt frames on either side of the stone fireplace. Bill felt sorry for the old Chinaman.

Ben Benton, back in the early days,

had saved Wong's life at Great Falls, Montana, where no Chinaman was allowed to stay longer than between two suns. Or between sunrise and sundown. Wong, hardly more than a boy, had wandered into the town, half famished, his shoes so badly worn that his feet were bleeding. He had been prospecting, placer mining along the Missouri River with some other Chinamen. White miners had robbed their camp, killed two of the Chinamen, and had thrown young Wong in the river. Luck, in the shape of a drifting cottonwood log and a sand bar below, had saved his life. His aimless wandering in an unknown country had brought him to the then small town of Great Falls, and, unfortunately, at a time shortly after the edict was issued that all Chinamen must keep moving. It was a smelter town—a copper town—a union town. They wanted no part of the heathen Chinee.

So Ben Benton, cattleman, who happened to be in town, saw the mob of miners and smeltermen jostling and abusing a small young Chinaman who could understand but two words of the English language. He kept repeating them as they jerked at his braided queue and slapping him. The boy's face was bleeding, his cotton clothes torn to shreds. His high pitched voice calling out in piteous appeal.

"Damn hell . . . damn hell. . . ."

Ben Benton took a hand. The six-shooter in his hand was all the law he needed. He was a powerful man in those days and afraid of nothing on earth.

"Damn hell . . . damn hell . . ." the Chinese boy kept telling Ben as they waited for the train. He was trying to thank this big, wide-shouldered, bearded man for saving his life. At Helena, the cowman tried to leave him with some of his own race. But a Chinese store keeper there explained to Ben that the boy would never leave him. That he would work for him forever for nothing.

So Wong became a fixture at the Slash B ranch, the devoted slave of the man who had saved his life, though Ben paid him wages. Save for two weeks each year when he went to Helena to celebrate Chinese New Year's, he stayed there at the ranch.

"Damn hell . . . damn hell. . . ." Wong's eyes looked up at the two crayon portraits, life size in their clumsy gilt frames that never were allowed to gather one speck of dust.

Bill wandered aimlessly around the room, smoking, trying to think. He could hear Buckshot snoring heavily now. He wondered what the outcome of their partnership would be. He reckoned he would have to buy out Buckshot's half interest. Things couldn't go on like this much longer. Buckshot Blue would have to straighten up and do his share. Bill's rodeo earnings were paying expenses but not much more than that. And Buckshot was neglecting his share of it. Even a man with a crippled arm could get out and ride around and keep an eye on things. Hire a man or two to keep the fences up, keep the cattle from drifting, brand up the calves missed on the spring round-up, boss the hay crews. But Buckshot was not on the job. There would have to be a show-down of some kind—and that before very long.

Bill's pacing the floor had brought him to the far end of the room. To the gun-rack on the wall. Shotguns and Winchester carbines were there with a couple of six-shooters—and the .303 Savage sporting rifle.

Bill took the Savage from the rack. Guns were a hobby of his. He always kept them oiled and clean, after the manner of all gun lovers.

He sniffed at the barrel of the rifle, then took a clean white cloth and ramrod

and ran it down the barrel. The rag came out fouled with burnt powder. Bill finished cleaning the gun, then replaced it in the rack. Wong's eyes were watching him. But Bill did not seem to notice. He went outside and rolled a cigarette. He wanted to get out of that room with its damned odors. He felt sort of sick inside. . . .

## CHAPTER THREE

### End of a Partnership

IT WAS two nights and a day before Buckshot Blue was back to normal. Bill had stayed with him during the worst part of his ravings, when he fought like a wildman to free himself, his eyes glassy, wild, unseeing, his tongue bitten almost half in two, his face a grayish green twisted in a distorted mask. And there were times when his whole frame twitched and shook like a man taken down with chills. And all during this, Bill nursed him, relieved only by Wong. There was no use letting the cowboys or hay crew know what was going on. They stayed at the bunk house, a hundred yards away. Still they must have wondered at the noises that came from the house, at the groans, wild cursing, and screams like a man in mortal agony. Several of the hay crew drew their time. And Bill reckoned that they carried some damned queer tales to town with them. Bill had said a few words to the three cowboys. They'd savvy.

"Buck took on too much moonshine." Bill's grin told the rest. They grinned back. They were cowhands and savvied. Nor did they mention the fact that, by plumb accident, one of them had discovered, buried in the manure pile, the mutilated saddle with its silver conchos that Bill had hastily buried there, tied in a heavy canvas saddle sack. The saddle had been buried exactly as it had been found. Those cowboys thought a hell of a lot of Bill Benton—and of Buckshot Blue, when he wasn't too damned ornery while Bill was away. This wasn't Buckshot's first attack of D. T.'s. But they weren't squealing on Buck. That wasn't any part of their job. But they were almighty glad that Bill was back. Bill had a way of grinning and passing over things and getting everything in shape.

When Buckshot came out of it, Bill untied the ropes and poured out two drinks. Then he put the pint bottle in his pocket. Buckshot, gaunt, hollow-eyed, unshaven, pulled back the covers and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Bill held out the stiff drink of whiskey.

"Throw it into you, pardner," Bill said. "You need it."

But Buckshot was shaking so that he couldn't hold the glass. Bill held it to the man's mouth. Some of the liquor spilled, but most of it went down.

"I musta been damned snakey," he said, his voice warmed a little by the whiskey, "when I had to be tied down in bed."

Bill Benton grinned and filled his partner's glass again. It would take three big jolts, maybe four, to pull Buck out of the shakes.

"Get outside of this, Buck." Bill grinned. "We'll call it medicine."

Buckshot did not smile. This time he managed, without spilling too much, to raise the glass to his mouth. He sat on the edge of the bed, wearing a cotton nightshirt that came to his knees. Bill rolled and lit a cigarette, then handed it to Buckshot, who took it.

There was a long, awkward silence. Buckshot's nerves were getting steadier now. But he did not look at Bill. He kept looking out the window—looking without seeing anything. Bill poured him another drink and set it on the table.

"See you when you get feelin' better, Buck."

Buckshot did not answer. He did not even look at Bill as the latter left the room.

IT WAS an hour later that Buckshot Blue came out on the big porch where Bill sat smoking, reading the *Western Livestock Journal*. He had shaved, nicking his jaw in several places, patching the cuts with bits of brown cigarette paper. He had on a clean shirt and overalls and his boots. He took one of the rawhide-seated chairs a little ways from Bill and stared almost unwinkingly towards the mountains.

From the alfalfa field below came the sound of a mowing machine. A meadowlark sang its evening song.

It was an awkward, rather tense silence that held the two men. Bill noticed that some of the color had come back into Buckshot's face. He wondered if Buck had been hitting a bottle which he had kept hidden somewhere. Drunks are like that, planting a pint or a quart to sober up on—keeping a hole card. He hoped Buck wasn't going to get ugly. The two sat there for fully half an hour. Finally Bill broke the silence that was getting unbearable.

"I have to go to town tomorrow, Buck. Anything I can fetch you back?"

"Not a damn' thing." Buckshot's voice was flat, unfriendly.

"Have to deposit some money or I'd not be goin' in."

"Miles City winnin's?"

Buckshot and Bill, for the past many months, had never mentioned the money that Bill brought home from the contests. In fact, they only spoke of those shows when it became necessary.

"Miles City dinero?" Buck spoke without taking his eyes from the distant mountains.

"Not much, but it'll pay hay crew wages for a week or so."

"You made it. Keep it." Buckshot did not turn his head. His voice was on edge, unsteady.

Bill did not reply. Buckshot was in no state of mind to listen to reason. He made an effort to lighten the tension.

"Comin' up from the Rocky Point Crossin'," he said, "I had dinner at the Bacon ranch. Anne's goin' to teach the Moccasin school this winter. Some feller in the pen sent her a fancy horsehair bridle he'd made and she had it on that paint pony you gave her two years ago at the Rocky Point Christmas dance. She said to tell you. . . ."

Buckshot Blue twisted out of his chair with a catlike leap. His fists were clenched. His black eyes, sunken, bloodshot, glittered like the eyes of an animal. He stood, long legs widespread, his face white, tense.

"Damn you, Benton, I've a mind to kill you!" he rasped, his voice like the scrape of a file against granite.

BILL did not leave his chair. But every muscle in his body was taut. He was not afraid of Buckshot who, with his one good arm, could hit like the kick of a mule. Nor was he afraid of the gun he noticed now for the first time, shoved in the waistband of the crippled cowboy's overalls. Then he watched Buckshot's eyes, eyes gone red, not quite sane—the eyes of a man who would kill.

"You go away to the shows," gritted Buckshot, "and have a hell of a good time. You, with your two good arms. You come back and brag about your money that you're throwin' into the jackpot. And me stuck here like a damned sheepherder. Alone. And you got the guts to come back and brag about pullin' down prize money. Tellin' me about Anne Bacon. Damn you, Benton. You and her!"

Buckshot suddenly turned and in three strides was across the porch. The screen

door slammed behind him. He covered the distance between the house and the barn in long strides. Bill watched him go. And then out of the corner of his eye he saw old Wong, half hidden behind the living room door. In the clawlike hand of the old Chinaman was a long-barreled six-shooter of ancient model. Wong slipped out of sight, the gun hidden in the sleeve of his black sateen Chinese blouse.

Bill rolled another cigarette. He watched the barn door. He reckoned that Buckshot would saddle up and head for Moccasin to get drunk once more. Then Buckshot Blue came riding out of the barn. But instead of taking the road to town, he came spurring up to the house. He jerked his horse to a sliding halt.

"When you see Anne Bacon," he called, "give her my best regards. I hope that spotted horse turns a somersault and cripples her like I got mine. And you can both go to hell!"

He rode away in a swirl of dust. Bill Benton looked after him until the dust cloud was hidden by the ridge beyond the corrals. He knew now that he had made a bad blunder by mentioning Anne's name. Buckshot, tall, handsome, proud, had won favor in the soft brown eyes of Anne Bacon. Like many another girl, she had been proud of his attentions. He had taken her to dances, given her presents of candy and little trinkets—and the pinto pony—though Anne Bacon had never given him more than a small kiss now and then when he left her after taking her home from a dance. Anne was not like most of the girls who fell for the handsome Buckshot Blue.

Bill could not blame Buckshot much for being so bitter now. He knew Buck, understood the fierce pride of the man. Buck had never let Anne Bacon or any other girl he knew see him with his bent, crippled arm. Only the painted girls of the Antlers knew him now. He bought their false favors with a twisted, bitter smile. And shunned the company of girls like Anne Bacon.

Bill cursed himself for being a damned fool. Why had he brought up the name of Anne Bacon, knowing, as he did, the warped pride of the man who had once been termed the handsomest cowboy of them all? Now Buckshot Blue was riding away. Busting up their partnership, their friendship, riding, perhaps to hell, with a heart as heavy as lead saturated with gall. God only could know what would become of Buckshot Blue. . . .

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Bushwhack Rumors

IT WAS after dark when Bill Benton rode into the little cow town of Moccasin. He put his horse in the barn and walked up the street to the Antlers.

Slick Arnold was dealing black jack. Doc was banking a stud game. Drake was lined up at the bar with Ike Skelton and Sid Purcell. Bill walked up to the stud game. The sallow-faced, cold-eyed Doc looked up at him with a thin smile.

"I'm lookin' for Buck. Where is he?"

Doc Arnold shuffled the deck of cards in his hands. His eyes, usually unreadable, held a glint of amusement.

"Have you tried the jail?"

"Meanin' what, Arnold?"

"Nothin'. And don't interrupt the game or I'll have the bouncer toss you out on your head. This ain't the Slash B, Benton. You're overmatched here. That door you used comin' in swings both ways. Use it. You're just as welcome as I was at the Slash B. Get to hell out."

Bill took in the situation at a glance. Slick had quit dealing and his right hand was hidden under his black alpaca dealer's coat. Slick always kept a short-barreled little gun under there. And at the bar stood Skelton, Purcell and Drake.

"A tin-horn like you," said Bill quietly, "always has the odds in his favor. A cold deck. Dealin' from the bottom. You never played anything but a brace-game in your life. But it might be that I'll buck that brace-game some day and your odds won't count."

He walked out of the place and down the street. He met a man or two and stopped them. "Seen Buck in town?" he'd ask.

But nobody had seen anything of Buckshot Blue.

Bill was in the post office getting his mail from the box when the familiar, soft-drawled voice of the old cattleman who owned the bank, came over his shoulder.

"Hoped you'd be in before long, Bill."

Bill Benton looked up with a quick grin. Old Judge Burns had been a friend of his father's. One of the old pioneer bankers, a cattleman of the old school, and as honest as the Montana laws that he had enforced in the early days as a Vigilante.

"I come into town, sir," said Bill, "to have a little medicine talk with you. I want. . . ."

"Come on over to the house, Bill. After bankin' hours, you know. Had supper?"

"Not yet."

"We're havin' Irish stew and dumplin's. It's the hired girl's night off. So we're havin' what we like. Just me and the missus. And I'm takin' you on up to the house. When the hired girl gets a night off, we kind of celebrate with a mulligan stew and the fluffiest dumplin's you ever put under your belt, young man. Swede hired girls don't savvy dumplin's. Back in '86 your dad had a meal of 'em. And, Bill, your mother has had many a sewin' bee with the missus. And whatever we got to talk about in the way of business, we'll take care of it later."

For the last time that day, Bill Benton asked that repeated question. "Is Buckshot Blue in town?"

Judge Burns hesitated a second. Then he spoke. He spoke without looking at Bill. Judge Burns was examining his mail, slitting open envelopes with the whetted blade of an old stock-knife.

"Ain't seen him this evenin', Bill. . . . Hmmmm. Now can you beat that, Bill, for damned orneriness? That's what it amounts to as near as I can tell." He handed Bill a circular put out by the government. It was a reward. The notice of a cash price on the head of a man named Jones, with half a dozen aliases. The man was a horse thief, a rustler, a killer.

But before Bill could get the complete description of the man, Judge Burns took it out of his hand and put it in his pocket.

AT THE home of Judge Burns, Bill Benton, in his overalls and flannel shirt and without a coat, was made welcome. Mrs. Burns had snow white hair, a motherly smile, and dark eyes. She seemed to understand the hearts of boys and girls who are still young in this world.

It was a wonderful supper. Bill almost forgot why he had come to town. But after they had eaten, when Bill and Judge Burns sat in the banker's library, Bill broached the subject.

"I'd like to buy out Buckshot Blue's interest in the Slash B outfit, sir. I got seven hundred in cash on me. There's enough in the bank to buy Buck's half. Buck is a good man and all that, and I'll stake him to anything he wants, so far as I can, but I reckon it's time him and I divided the trail. Maybe you could sort of fix it up and give Buck his half of it. Buck's crippled and I won't quit him. But things at the ranch ain't so good. I won't leave Buck in a tight, you understand. Only, the last few months, we

don't see things like we did. I know how much he put into the outfit. I'll pay him back every dollar he laid on the line. Buckshot Blue and I are done."

There was a silence. A long silence. Judge Burns smoked his cigar. Then he looked at Bill Benton and shook his head.

"I hate to tell you, Bill, but you haven't enough money left to buy out Buckshot Blue. You and Blue had a joint account. He's checked on it to the limit. You'd better keep that seven hundred dollars you have in your pocket, son. Buckshot Blue has gambled your outfit away."

Bill was so startled he couldn't speak for a moment. Then the judge went on. "The bank," Burns explained, "has a mortggae on your ranch. A first mortgage."

"This seven hundred dollars," began Bill, "will. . . ."

"Will stay in your pocket. When that mortgage comes due, which is about a month from now, I'll foreclose. The bank takes over the Slash B. That keeps Skelton and Purcell from getting it. My claim comes first. You can't sell so much as a calf. The mortgage covers all livestock. The bank practically owns your outfit. Buckshot Blue can't sign any of it away. He's overdrawn your account at the bank but he can't touch the stock or the land. I'm hiring you, Bill, to ramrod the outfit. I'll give you a chance to handle the cattle on shares. I'll stock that range as it should be stocked. I'll get hold of some government script and we'll get a permit to run cattle on the reservation. We'll lease some school sections and get a grazing permit on the Forest Reserve. The bank owns a few outfits that join your range. As a matter of fact, son, you'll be running one of the biggest outfits in Montana. You can ride up on Benton Butte, take a pair of field glasses, and look in every direction and you'll still be looking at Slash B range. In other words, you'll be getting back the outfit that Ben Benton lost in '86. But there won't be room on that range, big as it is, for Buckshot Blue."

"Then I reckon," said Bill slowly, "that lets me out, sir. I can't quit Buck in a tight. He's my pardner."

"He hasn't acted like one, Bill," the Judge said quietly.

"I can't quit him in a tight, Judge. I reckon you'll have to get somebody else to ramrod the outfit."

Bill spoke without anger. The older man bit the end off a cigar and lit it.

"You're a loyal friend, Bill. Tolerant. Square. Very well, we'll not discuss Buckshot Blue. Hire him if you want him. Name your own salary. Buckshot Blue works for forty a month. That's more than he's worth to me. But if I had a guess coming, I'd say he's quit the country."

BILL BENTON went on back to the ranch the next day. He knew that Buckshot Blue would not come back. And he thought a hell of a lot of Buck. No matter what men said about Buckshot Blue, to Bill he was all right. There at Miles City, Bill had talked to a doctor from back east. He had told this doctor about Buck's arm. And the doctor said that perhaps that shoulder could be made limber again. He's spoken of the Mayos as Rochester and the Johns Hopkins clinic—of doctors who had performed miracles. Bill had fetched back that news to Buckshot but had been cheated out of the chance to spill it.

Now Buck was gone. Bill went ahead with the work. Weeks slipped past. The time came for the fall round-up to start. Judge Burns had made the Slash B into a big outfit, a well stocked range with a big remuda of good horses. Bill had taken on many new cowboys; was running two round-up wagons and making the outfit pay. It was a man-sized job

and Bill didn't have much time to think about anything. Running a big cow outfit in Montana is not a job for a pilgrim or a lazy man.

"A man don't need a bed," said a bartender to a cowboy who was asking for a ranch job, "when he hires out to the Slash B. He'd better sell his bed and buy a box of matches. You ketch your circle horse about two hours before daylight, then have to strike a match to see if you've ketched the right horse. They pay top wages and they feed as good as the average outfit. But by God, you earn your pay. And no man is ever afoot when he steps up on a Slash B horse."

Buckshot Blue had disappeared. The Arnolds and the SP outfit had made a lot of ugly talk around town about Bill Benton—talk that spread across the country like a prairie fire.

Bill Benton was too busy running his outfit to hear much. The men he hired didn't talk to him about Buckshot Blue. And Bill hadn't been to town to pick up any range gossip.

THE first he knew of the ugly rumors was when he pulled down into the badlands along the Missouri River with his round-up wagons. He shaved that evening and took a bath and put on clean clothes from his warsack. Then he rode over to the Bacon ranch. It was a small river ranch. And for the past twenty years Major Bacon had the store and post office there at the Bull Island Crossing. The old man with his peg leg had never been a major. As a matter of fact he had been quartermaster sergeant under General Miles. And, even though he liked to boast about it, no cannon ball or Indian arrow had lost him that leg which had been amputated at the knee. As a matter of truth, he had gotten drunk one night when he was stationed at old Fort Musselshell and had fallen in the river. It was forty below zero that night and he had stepped into an air hole. He had enough whiskey inside him to keep him warm. So he had rolled into a convenient snowdrift and gone to sleep. And that leg that had been in the water up to his thigh, was frozen stiff in the morning. Because of his years in the service he had been given an honorable discharge and a good pension. He had married a rancher's daughter, located at Bull Island Crossing, and now lived the sort of life that would appeal to a retired quartermaster sergeant with twenty years of army service behind him. Major Bacon liked his pipe, his jug, his reading and his three full meals a day. He read all the postcards and would hold letters against a strong light to see if he could make out the words of the letter enclosed inside the envelope. He had a Buffalo Bill goatee and mustache and wore his hair long. It was thick and a yellowish white and came to his shoulders. He spent his idle hours polishing his peg leg. His favorite topic of conversation was politics.

So it was from the rather garrulous Major Bacon that Bill Benton first heard the ugly sort of rumor concerning Buckshot Blue.

Bill was not wholly unprepared for bad news. Anne's welcome had not been exactly cordial. She had shaken hands with him. Told him to put up his horse, said that supper would be ready in half an hour. Anne kept house for her father. Her mother was dead. An Assiniboine squaw helped around the house.

Bill had found the major down on the river bank. He had just finished setting his trot lines for catfish and was tying up his skiff to a tall cottonwood. The major shook hands, mopped the sweat from his red face with a blue bandana handkerchief, then took a wicker-covered demijon from a hollow log.

"Sit down, Bill, and let's have the

news," he suggested. "Heard the bank closed you out."

"The bank owns the outfit now," admitted Bill. He choked a little as Major Bacon's home-stilled moonshine burned his throat.

"Skelton and Purcell stopped by a few days ago," volunteered the major.

"They're workin' up the river about fifteen miles, so I heard. Gatherin' wild stuff they missed last fall," Bill said.

"They were asking about Buckshot Blue."

"That was damned thoughtful of 'em."

Major Bacon took a pull at his demijon. He had a habit of shutting one eye in a quizzical manner, eyebrow cocked.

"I don't like Skelton or Purcell, either," he said slowly. "Never did. What business is it of theirs if you had a fight with Buckshot and kicked him off the ranch? What if Buckshot's horse was found dead on a sand bar below here, shot behind the shoulder and a bullet buried in the pommel of the saddle? When they hinted that you killed Buckshot, I up and told 'em both that they lied. That's what I did."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A Warrant for Bill Benton

MAJOR BACON, during his army career, had borne the reputation of being the best guard-house lawyer in the service. He knew the I. D. R. backwards, knew the behavior of a soldier, the duties of an officer, military and civilian law. He had been broken a few times for minor offences such as peddling whiskey, purloining canteen tickets, selling blankets and shoes and rations that rightfully belonged to the government that was paying him in cash and canteen tickets whatever was due him. He had grown fat when he was mess sergeant. Supply sergeant gave him all the clothes he could wear or hock. But whether he was buck private or sergeant, he constantly moved in and out of the guard-house. Once he had been a bugler. He claimed he had been bugler with the famous Seventh Cavalry and that the only reason he hadn't been with General Custer at the battle of the Little Big Horn was because he happened to be taken down with an attack of what the medico called laryngitis and he couldn't blow a damned note on the bugle. So he had been left behind and another soldier had blown that fatal "charge" that led the buckskin-shirted hero and his men to their last battle. Major Bacon had told it all so many times that he got to believing it himself. There were those who claimed that he had talked his wife into an early grave.

But to Anne he was the man who could do no wrong. She mothered him. She listened to him. Se washed his clothes, mended his socks, cooked his meals and made his bed. And when he had nibbled at the jug too freely, she would tuck him into bed after unstrapping his polished wooden leg.

"They can't do a damn' thing," Major Bacon went on to explain, starting in to skin a seven pound catfish, "unless they find what the law calls the corpus delicti. Not a damn' thing, understand? They got to have that corpse laid on the line. Damned tootin'. Not that I'm sayin' that you done it, Bill. But I'm tellin' you your rights and how to stand up for 'em. Corpus delicti means the dead body of Buckshot Blue. They ain't found it. Skelton and Purcell ain't gatherin' wild cattle. They're huntin' for that corpus delicti. But I know this river. Know every whirlpool and undercurrent and snag and sandbar. I ketch catfish that know this river and I know how to bait a trot-line. If Buckshot was killed below here, where we found his horse dead, then his corpus delicti is twenty miles below, down below the 'narrows' and buried in the sand ten foot deep."

He wandered right off the subject without taking a breath. "Now, son, take the day before the battle of the Little Big Horn, I was talkin' to General Custer's brother Tom. Tom was talkin' about Bill Cody and Jim Bridger and Kit Carson and. . . . Reminds me of that Injun fightin' scout named Liver Eatin' Johnson. Now me and Liver Eatin' was workin' with a scoutin' party over into the Nez Perce country, when Chief Joseph was headin' for Four Buttes, not a day's horseback ride from here. At that time I was chief scout for Miles and I'm eatin' prairie dog stew and rattlesnake for dessert and washin' it down with alkalai water and smokin' kinni-kinnik Injun tobacco and talkin' sign language to the Gros Ventres, Assiniboines and Crows, to say nothin' of the Sarcees and Crees from Canada, when who in hell should ride up but. . . ."

From the cabin the supper bell rang. Major Bacon took time to wipe off his wooden leg and pick up the wet gunnysack full of catfish. Then, conversation forgotten, he headed for the cabin and supper.

BILL got his horse and rode away. From the cabin he could hear the sound of the major's voice. He could hear Anne, too, and thought he heard her laugh, once, but he couldn't make sure. It was getting dusk when he rode off into the badlands' gathering twilight. He didn't know whether Anne had watched him go, or not. The tipsy major had expected him to come on to the house for supper. Instead, Bill had ridden away. It was after first guard time when he reached camp.

There was a huge coffee pot filled with black coffee, simmering at the back of the stove. Pie made of dried apples and raisins—baking powder biscuits and cold meat. The round-up cook, an old timer, cranky as hell, woke up. Bill sipped his coffee and swallowed big chunks of pie. The cook rolled a cigarette. He was bald-headed and had a walrus mustache. The cowboys called it a coffee strainer.

Now, a round-up cook is supposed to know more than any cowboy about range gossip. And that supposition is usually the truth. He gets his news from the night-hawk, the horse wrangler, the grub-line riders who want a meal, the reps from the other outfits. A round-up cook is something like a king. And any of them will tell the world, in language that would make a pirate or mule skinner blush for shame, that theirs is the lousiest job this side of hell. He will tell you about the sourdough keg that got turned over, or talk of the broncs they had to drive for a lead team and the wheelers who were always straddling the wagon tongue and pawing into the stretcher bars. And he'll go on into telling of bog holes and wagon pilots that don't know the country, of rainy nights when the lemon extract ran out because the damned wagon boss wouldn't order it by the case. He'd curse cowboys sitting on his bedroll and muddying up the mess tent of a rainy day, or a damned stove that won't draw with green wood and wet cowchips for fuel. And them knotheaded cowhands hollering for that suet pudding known from Texas to Montana as a son-of-a-dog in a sack. The life of a round-up cook, when the work is hard and the outfit is moving twice a day, is no sinecure. . . .

So Baldy's expression, as he came out from under his tarp and blinked while he fumbled for tobacco and papers, was far from being angelic. But Bill didn't notice.

"Baldy," he said, sipping his black coffee, "they're tellin' it around that I killed Buckshot Blue."

"So I heard," Baldy said. "And I told

that damned SP rep that he lied like hell. I run him out of camp at supper time with a cleaver. Bill, there's a fresh pie hid under my slicker in the jockey box. Prune and raisins and apples. Somethin' brand new. Tie into it. And hell, you never killed Buckshot Blue. He ain't even dead. And there's some real butter to spread on that pie. The horse jingler stole it from a sheep camp. It's wrapped up in a dish towel and hid in under the can of axle grease. Hell, no, you didn't kill Buckshot. He's plenty alive. Now let a man git back to sleep."

Bill ate his pie and went to bed. He knew that Baldy must be right about Buckshot. Otherwise he wouldn't have said anything. Baldy was like that. He prided himself that he never lied when he made a statement that would be labeled range gossip. Others, in the repetition of the tale, might twist or stretch the facts, but not so, old Baldy. So it was a cinch bet that Baldy's information was first hand. But Bill knew that it was no use to ask questions. Old Baldy would tell what he wanted to tell—but not another word beyond that.

EVEN though a man be innocent, it is unpleasant to know that he is being accused of an ugly crime. And Bill Benton knew that they were telling it around that he had murdered Buckshot Blue. Forgotten were the faults of Buck. The cow country thought him dead and they were remembering his virtues, rather than his faults. Ike Skelton, Sid Purcell, the two Arnolds and Drake saw to that. And in the telling of it all, many things were hinted.

Bill Benton was accused of butchering SP beef. A butcher at Moccasin who handled stolen meat had quit the country. Before he left he had said, there in the Antlers, that Bill Benton was to blame for it all. Purcell and Skelton had had the butcher arrested for buying stolen cattle. He had made a confession. Someone, for some reason, had gone the man's bail. The butcher had jumped bail, but behind him remained a sworn confession implicating Bill Benton and Buckshot Blue. But because Bill was alive and Buckshot believed dead, the blame was laid at Bill's door.

A hundred and one other stories were told—stories of violent quarrels between Bill and Buckshot—of hatred between the two partners. Anne Bacon's name was dragged into it. They liked to tell it that Bill Benton, after Buck had been crippled, had stolen Buck's girl. It was all damned ugly talk. And the sheriff of Moccasin, prodded by the insistent demands of Skelton and Purcell, backed by the butcher's confession, had headed for the Slash B ranch with a bench warrant for Bill Benton.

At the ranch, old Wong had not helped Bill's case. The little old Chinaman had exploded like one of his firecrackers.

"You put Boss Billy in jail, Wong laise plenty hell. My boy all light. My lilly kit alle time al light. Buckshot Blue damn fool. No good. Alle time dlunk. Alle time call bad names. Cuss Wong alle time. Big talk. Dlunk talk. Damn hell . . . damn hell. . . ."

Wong talked some more, not sparing Buckshot Blue, and singing the praises of Bill Benton. And to make things worse, the sheriff found some bits of hide hidden in a haystack. Pieced together these bits of hide made a P and S that fitted exactly into the holes of the hide which Skelton and Purcell had shown Bill. Drake and the two Arnolds were willing to testify that they had seen either Bill or Buckshot cache those bits of hide.

"It's time," blustered Ike Skelton, when he swore out the bench warrant for Bill Benton, "that the law done somethin' about this rustlin'. We're entitled to law

protection. Fetch back Bill Benton, dead or alive. He's a rustler. And it looks like he killed Buckshot Blue. Fetch him in."

The sheriff was an old timer who never acted on impulse. But he had his duty as a peace officer to perform. And the evidence was against Bill Benton.

But when the old time sheriff finally reached the Slash B round-up wagon at the edge of the badlands, Bill Benton was not with the outfit. Nor could the law officer get any definite information from anyone there.

"Ask me no questions," snapped the old round-up cook, "and I'll tell you no lies. And if I figgered you'd harm Bill Benton, I'd slip a bait of strychnine in your grub. You leave that boy plumb alone or this county will be needin' a new sheriff. One that can't be bought by crooks like Skelton and Purcell."

The sheriff, years ago, had been wagon boss for the Slash B when Baldy had cooked for the outfit.

"This ain't any pleasure trip, Baldy," he tried to explain. "Bill's a damn good boy. I hate like hell to serve this bench warrant. But I got my oath of office to remember."

Baldy didn't argue. But he managed to feed the sheriff a good bait of beans that had gone sour. The Mexican sauce on the beans took away the slightly sour taste. And for forty-eight hours the sheriff was as sick as a poisoned wolf.

"You bin drinkin' bad whiskey," was old Baldy's unsympathetic comment as he listened to the sheriff's groans. "I'll fix you up a fuzee. Vinegar and sody and sugar and water. Kills the germs in this alkalai water. In a few days you'll lose that green color in your face."

So Bill Benton had a forty-eight-hour start. And every Slash B cowboy was given his fill of suet pudding that Baldy now called "an SP man-in-the-sack."

The sheriff's illness was no joke. Sour beans are almost as bad as ptomaine poison—not fatal, but damned annoying and nauseating. And somehow during those days the bench warrant for Bill Benton was lost.

"Now ain't that just plain hell?" sympathized old Baldy. "You got to ride plumb back to Moccasin and have a new warrant swore out."

"Damn you, Baldy. This might cost me my job."

"Talk that over with Judge Burns, not Ike Skelton or Purcell," Baldy suggested. "And every damn' cowboy in this outfit is free, white, and of age and entitled to a vote. No ringers. And if it comes to a tight there won't be more than a handfull of SP voters showin' up at election time."

## CHAPTER SIX

### A Gun for a Girl

BILL BENTON wrote a note to Judge Burns after he vanished and left it where his old friend would be sure to find it. He couldn't go away without explaining.

> I never was a coyote in my life. But I got word that the SP outfit is after me. I reckon you know that they are framing me. Just like they lied about Buckshot Blue. Ike Skelton and Sid Purcell are in with the Arnolds and Drake. Buck got cheated in that poker game. I hold nothing against him. But I'm telling you right now that Buckshot Blue never butchered an SP steer or any other critter that didn't wear the Slash B iron. They claim I killed Buck. I got reason to know that Buck ain't dead. I have to hide out for a spell because the law is after me. I'll show up when the sign is right. Until then you just have to trust me and take my word for it that I ain't guilty.

The sheriff told Judge Burns about the bait of sour chili beans. They chuckled

over their watered whiskey about it. Both of them had punched cows together when Baldy cooked for the outfit.

"Looks to me, Judge, like they are framin' Bill Benton," said the sheriff. "Bill ain't a cow thief and he never killed Buckshot Blue." He lifted his drink.

"Of course Bill's innocent. And if you give him time, he'll prove it."

"But I got to serve that bench warrant, Judge."

"Sure. But don't sweat your horse too hard."

The sheriff grinned, headed out on a trail he didn't want to follow. But Bill Benton, with a week's start, was not easy to find. Bill was doing a little detective work.

It was the dark of the moon and two hours until daylight when Bill Benton woke old Wong with a pebble tossed against the window of the Chinaman's room.

"Damn hell . . . damn hell. . . ."

The whiskers on Bill's face were getting longer. He had almost a beard, now, and the hairy bristle brought a chuckle from old Wong. Bill grinned as they smoked together behind drawn window-blinds.

"Now about this shootin' party, Wong," Bill asked, referring to that time so long ago when he'd returned from the last rodeo. "Doc and Slick Arnold come out to knock over some prairie chicken and ducks, they said. They had shotguns along that was never taken out of the leather cases. There was no game killed. But there was bloodstains on a tarp at the barn, and the tracks that led from where an SP beef was butchered, were tracks that belonged to the buckboard belongin' to Drake. That .303 Savage rifle was used. Who in hell used that buckboard and that gun the night before I got home from Miles City?"

"Buckshot Blue," came the prompt reply.

"Wong, that's the first time you ever lied to me."

There was an awkward silence—almost unfriendly. Then Wong talked, his eyes unflinching. Buckshot had not taken the gun or the buckboard. Buckshot had been asleep, drunk or drugged, when Drake took the .303 Savage and had gone away with Doc Arnold about moonrise. They had washed the blood from their hands when they came back. They had left some bloody overalls and jumpers in the woodshed. And they had hidden the SP brands in the haystack. Wong had watched them—Wong, who hated Buckshot Blue as only a Chinaman knows how to hate.

Bill Benton didn't reprimand Wong. He understood the fierce loyalty in the old Chinaman's heart and loved him for that devotion. He thanked Wong for coming honest, then rode back to the badlands.

SUNRISE found him squatted on his heels by the sandbar where Major Bacon always tied his skiff. He had not long to wait. The Major always took care of his trot-lines. This morning he looked the worse for wear. He had all the earmarks of an habitual inebriate with a hangover. His long hair needed combing and his peg-leg was a little unsteady. He was trying to hum a half forgotten song. And there was a six-shooter tucked in the waistband of his freshly laundered overalls. At sight of Bill, he halted with a jerk. His rather bleary eyes took on a look that might have been fear.

"It's you, Bill!"

"It's me, Major." Bill grinned. "Skelton and Purcell kept you up late. I watched 'em ride away before daylight. I hear that they are offerin' a bounty on my scalp. That why you're packin' that cannon?"

"Why. . . . no, no, Bill. . . . Of course not!"

"I'll need that skiff of yours," Bill went on. "And I'll need you. You know this river as well as any man does. I'm not a rustler. I didn't kill Buckshot Blue. Buckshot ain't even dead. I'm out to hang a few hides on the fence so that the cow country can read their brands. Either you can help me or you can keep on drinkin' your rotten moonshine with snakes like Ike Skelton and Sid Purcell. I'm goin' to find out what has become of Buckshot Blue. Are you lendin' a hand?"

"Of course, Bill. Naturally. . . ." The major pulled himself together. "You're damned right I'll lend a hand," he almost roared. "Now about last night, I just led 'em on. Let on like I'd play their game. But all the time, so help me, Pete, I was just leading 'em on. Never believed a word they said. Neither did Anne."

"We won't go into that," Bill said. "Get your oars and we'll take a little trip over to Bull Island."

"You're stayin' for breakfast, Bill," the major insisted. "Anne's makin' sourdough flapjacks and there'll be hot biscuits and catfish and a steak if you want it. Or eggs and bacon."

Bill shook his head. "I ate before I reached here. I'm huntin' Buckshot Blue and you're helpin' me. You and Anne think I killed him. By God, I'll prove you wrong or know why. And any time you feel lucky enough to try for that bounty money the SP outfit offers, go ahead. I'll take away your pop gun and feed it to your catfish. And so far as Anne is concerned, she. . . ."

"Will answer for herself," came Anne's voice from behind. She was wearing moccasins and had made no noise. There was a .32 target pistol in her hand.

"I heard dad talking to someone," she said. "I was a little curious. So I came on down to the river."

"To collect the bounty on my scalp?" grinned Bill without a trace of humor.

"To protect my father." Anne's face was pale, save for a red flush across her cheekbones. "Father is not well."

"You believe what they say about me, Anne?" Bill asked bluntly. "You believe what Skelton and Purcell claim?"

"No."

"But you hate me for something."

"I wouldn't call it hatred."

"Then name it."

"Have you treated Buck fairly?"

"What do you think?"

"Only what everybody says," the girl answered. "And what Buck himself has said. That, because he was crippled and couldn't keep up his end, you wanted to get rid of him. Buckshot Blue, the cripple, was not welcome at the Slash B. You told him to get off the ranch and never come back. You abused him when he was ill and helpless. Your own men, men working at the ranch, heard him moaning and begging for mercy. And you wouldn't let anyone in the house but the Chinaman Wong who hates Buck. That is what those men told in town. Can you deny the charges without lying?"

"Not if you're willin' to believe what a bunch of hay hands told when they got drunk," Bill said coldly.

"What do you want with my father?" the girl asked.

"I need a skiff and somebody that knows this river."

"The skiff is government property. It belongs to the Post Office Department. If you must get across the river, dad will take you over. But you can't come here and commandeer the boat and the services of a sick man."

Bill grinned a little, looking at the pistol in Anne's hand. His voice was an even, unhurried drawl.

"Buckshot Blue is somewhere near here. Mebbyso on one of the islands or

back in the hills. He might be hurt or sick and be needin' help. I'm huntin' him. He's my pardner. I'm takin' that rowboat, no matter who owns it. Put away that pea shooter before it goes off and mebbyso punctures a hole in the skiff. And I need that boat mighty bad. I'm goin' to help my pardner Buckshot Blue."

Anne Bacon lowered her gun. Her lower lip was between her white, strong teeth. Then she spoke.

"I'm sorry, Bill. I had no right to say any of what I did. You're welcome to the boat. I'll go along, if you need me. Only this all has hurt me so much. Buck talked in town. He was bitter. Bill, I'll do all I can to pay you back for what I've said."

Bill smiled. Then, for the first time that morning. . . .

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Dead Can't Talk

BULL ISLAND was about half a mile long and in places nearly a quarter mile wide. The high water each spring when the ice and snow melted and tributary creeks that fed the Missouri poured muddy torrents into the river, always changed the shape of the island. It would build it here with mud and sand and waterlogged snags, cutting it away in other places. For the most part the island was covered by dense brush of red willow and other thick growth. There were a few cottonwoods on the higher part. Years ago somebody had built a cabin, a barn and a round corral there. Probably the outlaws known as the Wild Bunch had used it for a hideaway. You had to know the river to swim to it from either bank. And during high water the place was inaccessible.

"It was at the lower end of the island," explained Major Bacon as he nosed the skiff into the sandy bank and Bill made the boat fast to a tree, "that we found Buckshot's dead horse, saddle and all. A bullet hole in the saddle. Blood dried on it. What was Buckshot Blue doin' on that island?"

"That's what I hope to find out. You say that the SP outfit were camped along the river. That they heard shootin' about dark one night and Ike Skelton and Purcell got you to take 'em to the island in the skiff the next mornin'. And you found the dead horse and the saddle. Any tracks around?"

"That's the odd part of it. Some boot tracks. Two-three barefoot tracks leadin' to the water's edge. That was all. The barefoot tracks wasn't the same size as the boot tracks."

"You stay here with the skiff, Major," Bill said as he climbed out. "I'm takin' a look around the island. I won't be back till late this afternoon. Keep out of sight. If anybody crosses over from the shore, or if you sight any man on the island, shoot three times."

Bill made his way through the thick brush. At times the going was almost impossible. Several times he used a short-handled ax to cut a trail through. He was winded and soaked with sweat when he finally reached the cabin in the middle of the island. Instead of crossing the short clearing to the cabin, Bill sat down behind some brush and waited. He waited nearly an hour, watching the cabin. But no sign of life came from there. To all appearances the place was deserted. But he wanted to make absolutely certain. This was a dangerous game he was playing.

He heard brush crack, across the clearing. His gun in his hand, Bill tensed. Then he grinned as a cow with a yearling showed. There were always a few head of wild cattle on the island, left stranded there when the ice broke up in the spring.

Bill watched the cow and yearling graze around the corral. The grass was hock high and thick. Then, for no apparent reason, the cow lifted her head, sniffed, whirled and quit the clearing, breaking brush, the wild, unbranded yearling at her heels.

It was damned queer. . . .

BILL waited another half hour. Then he risked the chance of being shot at and stepped out into the open, his six-shooter in his hand. He passed the corral and was almost to the cabin when he stopped with a jerk. There ahead of him, not ten feet away, half hidden in the tall grass, was a high crowned black hat. From beneath its wide brim showed hair, part of a man's face. And a long gun barrel caught the sunlight.

Bill Benton had that athlete's gift of acting before thought with split-second co-ordination of brain and muscle. He leaped forward, his six-shooter cocked, and landed, legs wide-spread, standing over the form of a dead man—a dead man with a gun in his hand.

There was no doubt about the man being dead. He lay in an awkward position, on his side. He had been shot in the chest and through the head. Blood smeared his bearded face and his rough clothes. His blue flannel shirt was faded and patched. His overalls had holes in them. His boots were patched, rusty. And his hair and beard were uncombed, matted, black, sprinkled thickly with white. Around his middle was a worn cartridge belt, every loop filled. And Bill found that the gun in the lifeless hand held five empty shells in the chambers. It was a single-action Colt six-shooter, and the man had carried an empty chamber under the hammer to prevent accident.

He hadn't been dead long—not more than twenty four hours—and was a stranger, as near as Bill could tell.

In the cabin Bill found blankets and grub and unwashed dishes, some blood-stained rags and bloodstained water in a tin wash basin. There was also a carbine and a belt filled with cartridges to fit the gun. Grub enough to last a month, and some old magazines and Montana newspapers. The signs said that the cabin had been occupied for quite a while.

Bill went back to the dead man. He carried the body into the cabin and examined it more closely. He washed the blood from the man's face. There was something familiar about the face of that dead man, something that made Bill wonder where he had known the man. The pockets of the dead man revealed nothing of value. Tobacco and papers, matches, a jacknife. Bill could find no marks of identification on his clothing. The hat was a Stetson purchased in El Paso, Texas. The old boots were Justin boots, made in Texas.

The man had dark gray eyes and a dark skin; high cheekbones, like he might have a strain of Indian blood. . . .

Bill stared harder at the man's face. He covered the body with a blanket and rolled a cigarette.

"Shore queer," he mused aloud. "Shore queer. Same eyes, same nose, same kind of face as Buckshot. Only it ain't Buck because he's got too much hair and whiskers and he ain't got a scar acrost his nose. But it's almighty queer, just the same."

It took several hours for Bill Benton to finish searching the island. The search proved barren. He ran into some wild cattle that stampeded at sight of him. He found some horse tracks, but no horses except Buckshot's dead mount, too badly decomposed to give any clues. Then he made his way up the shore of the island to the little inlet where he had left Major Bacon and the skiff.

There was no trace of the skiff when

he got back. Bill swore under his breath. What in hell kind of a game was that peg-legged old whiskey maker trying to play, anyhow? Leaving a man stranded on Bull Island. . . .

Then his quick anger subsided. It wasn't like the old major to do a trick like that. Major Bacon had his little faults but he was not the sort of man to do a petty, underhanded trick. Bill, alarmed now, commenced a search.

It took him nearly half an hour to find Major Bacon. The white-maned, goateed old soldier was tied hand and foot and gagged. He had a bad bruise on his head, behind his left ear, and he had been well-hidden in the brush.

"I must have fell asleep," he confessed. "I was tuckered out from last night. Tuckered out. I had a few nips of likker and ate a snack. Laid down to ketch me a few minutes' sleep and I woke up like this—hogtied!"

"Who did it?" asked Bill.

"How the devil could I know, Bill? I was asleep. My head's splittin' wide open. Locate the jug. Then we'll get the skiff and get back home. I got a belly full of this island. I'm goin' home."

"Not unless you can swim, you ain't. The skiff is gone. We're afoot on the island. And there's a dead man at the cabin."

"Buckshot?"

"No. Not Buckshot. A stranger. There's been a gun fight on the island."

Major Bacon searched with shaking hands for his demijon, but it was gone. There was the major's gun, just where he had left it, but the whiskey had been stolen.

"A whiskey thief," Bill said aloud. And he knew that about the only thing that Buckshot Blue would ever steal would be whiskey, when he was drunk and needed it. . . .

"THERE ain't a damn' thing we can do," Bill told the major, "until dark. And then it will be up to you to earn some of the medals you have at home there in the glass cases in the what-not. I'm goin' to leave you in charge of the island. You have a gun and plenty of cartridges. You can amuse yourself by listenin' to the hoot owls."

"You mean that. . . ."

"That I'm swimming ashore when it gets dark," Bill said. "You stay here till I get back. If any man bothers you, kill him. If you get hungry, find your way to the cabin. You know damn' well where it is. You've been there. There are some of your empty jugs there. I didn't locate your still but I bet you have one on the island. Just the same as I know that Bull Island has been used to hide out men that were on the dodge. Skelton and Purcell know about this island. In the cabin I found some newspapers with their names on 'em, sent through the mail to the SP ranch, then fetched here to Bull island. Fetched in your skiff. . ."

Major Bacon's face was a study. He was shaking like a man taken with chills and fever.

"Look here, young feller, you're making some damaging statesments that lack any sort of proof. You can't. . . ."

"I have all the proof I'll need," said Bill. "You've been paid plenty to ferry men to this island. The grub in that cabin is from your store. The sougans and blankets have your mark on 'em. I'm askin' no questions till I know the right answers, myself. But when I do ask 'em, I want the truth. And I'll get it or I'll send you to the pen with the rest of the dirty crooks that take orders from the SP outfit. Now have you got that straight, Major?"

There was something pathetic about the wilted dignity of the pseudo major. He seemed to get older in those few min-

utes. Fear, fear and desperation showed in his eyes. The goatee on his chin quivered a little. His face looked gray.

"Bill, for God's sake. . . ." His voice was a harsh whisper.

"Well?"

"I had no part in any murder, Bill!" The major was trembling. "I'll swear it on the Bible that was given me by my mother. I've brought grub and likker here to Bull Island. I admit that. Skelton and Purcell paid me well. I never asked them questions. I was afraid to. I needed the money. Anne had to have her schoolin'. We had to have grub and clothes. Before God, I've never harmed a man, woman or child in my life. I took my skiff and fetched grub and a jug here. I left the stuff where they told me to leave it. Never once did I sight a human bein' on this island. I made my trips by the light of the moon. Skelton or Purcell would always pay me in cash. Double what the trip was worth. I didn't ask questions. God, Bill, if Anne suspected. . . ."

"She won't if you string your bets with me," Bill said. "There's a dead man on this island. The man that killed him knocked you on the head and stole the skiff. I'm goin' after that killer. Even if it's Buckshot Blue, I'll get him. Your job is to stay here till I get back. Kill any man that looks like an enemy. And I'd be the last man on earth to hurt Anne by tellin' her that you are a crook."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Murder for a Price

BILL made a compact bundle of his clothes and fastened them to his back. Naked, he waded into the black water. When the current caught him he started swimming. He made no attempt to buck the current. Rather, he angled downstream, taking it easy, pulling hard when a whirlpool or undercurrent caught him. He was a strong swimmer and knew the tricks of the old Missouri. He had swum it countless times, with and without a horse. He had crossed cattle at Bull Island and knew just what he was up against.

Behind, on the bank of the island, Major Bacon stood, peering into the darkness, trying to follow Bill's course. But it was too dark to see much. The old soldier stood there on the bank, his peg leg rooted in the sand. Every fibre, every nerve in his body craved a drink. Fear gripped his heart in a clammy clutch. But his thoughts were unselfish now. He was thinking of Anne. What if he were to be killed? What would become of Anne? Anne, for whom he had gone crooked. He hadn't ever wanted to turn a crooked hand. But poverty is an unscrupulous taskmaster.

"God forgive me," he kept saying in an undertone. And the swish-swash chuckling of the muddy river seemed to mock him. Stripped of his vanity, his false cloak, his beloved sham, he felt cold and very miserable and alone like a man stripped naked in a raw wind. He was alone. Alone with himself in the darkness.

A twig snapped somewhere behind him and he almost screamed aloud. Then his gun was gripped in clammy palms and he crouched, bathed in cold sweat. His heart pounded in his throat, almost choking him. Those sounds back there in the brush were furtive, cautious. Major Bacon had never in his life shot a gun in the direction of a man. He hated the thought of jerking the trigger, even as he grew nauseated at the thought of being shot. Wounded, killed, left to die alone in mortal agony—alone, without anyone to see—without Ann whom he worshipped with a wholehearted devotion.

Then he heard a man's harsh cough. The next instant Major Bacon was shoot-

ing at a man whose gun spewed fire.

Out there in the river, his ears filled with water, Bill Benton did not hear the sounds of gunfire. There was the deafening rush of swirling water in his ears. An ugly snag pulled him under, all but drowning him. He fought on desperately for the river bank. Then his feet touched ground and he crawled ashore on all fours, his sodden clothes weighting down his back.

He lay on the bank until he got back his wind. Then he twisted what water he could from his clothes and dressed. He stood there on the river bank, listening. Not a sound came from the island that was invisible in the darkness.

He had guessed his landing with better accuracy than he had hoped for. It was less than three miles to an SP line camp. He struck out on foot. With decent luck he could steal a horse and saddle from the camp and get back to Major Bacon's place. There was an extra skiff there. He'd send somebody down to rescue the Major and bring away the dead man.

Blisters bothered his feet as his wet boots rubbed his feet raw. But he did not slack his pace.

There was a light burning at the little line camp when he reached it. It showed at the log cabin, from behind the gunnysack blinds. There were two saddled horses in front of the cabin. Bill crept up under the blanketed window. From inside came the sound of voices.

"I don't like this business a damned bit, Doc."

Bill stiffened. That was the heavy voice of Drake, the cattle buyer of unsavory reputation.

"You might not like it, Drake," sounded the flat voice of Doc Arnold, "but you'll play your cards like I tell you: You're into this too damned deep to back out. . . . And lay off that damned booze. Who do you think you are, anyhow? Buckshot Blue? You know what booze did to him."

"But God, Doc, murder is murder. I don't want to kill a man that never harmed me."

"Quit whinin' and listen to what I'm saying," Doc Arnold snapped. "We got all the aces in the deck and the joker to boot. Buckshot Blue is dead. Bill Benton is on the dodge with a price on his head. That leaves only old Judge Burns. And up till now you've been cut into the easy money without doing a damned thing but look wise and get drunk. Your little chore is to kill Judge Burns. He'll be at the Slash B ranch to-morrow night. I'll see to that by sending a fake note from Bill Benton that'll fetch him on the double-quick. You'll be there. You'll have a shotgun. You can't miss at ten foot range, there at the barn. It's a cinch."

"By God, it's murder. I won't do it! I tell you, I'll see you in hell first!"

WHAT happened now took place in split-second time. Bill smashed the window with his six-shooter, then tore away the gunnysacking. Even as the blast of gunfire inside the cabin crashed in his ears. Bill ducked behind a small shed just as the door burst open and the burly Drake staggered outside, swaying like a drunken man. There was blood on his face and his gun arm dangled limply. He lurched towards the horses, stumbling.

Now, framed in the lighted doorway was Doc Arnold. There was a twisted grin on his face as he took aim at Drake's back.

Bill's shot spun the gambler around. His second shot knocked the killer's gun from his hand.

"That'll hold you, Arnold," he gritted, and he ran over to the gambler, kicked the fallen gun beyond reach, then knocked Doc Arnold cold with the barrel of his

gun. He called to the wounded cattle buyer.

"Come on back, Drake."

Drake, dazed, bewildered, stood swaying on his big legs, his face mottled. Bill led him back to the cabin. The big man was drunk. A bullet had grazed his head, partly stunning him. Doc Arnold's other bullet had broken the big man's arm near the elbow. Bill's smashing the window had spoiled Doc Arnold's aim, distracted his attention for that second.

Inside the cabin Bill Benton looked at Drake. He had never liked the crooked cattle buyer but he forgot his contempt for the man now. After all, Drake had risked death rather than to do murder.

"Sit down and take it easy, Drake," he said. "I'll have you patched up as quick as I can. Where's the man that's supposed to stay here at the camp?"

"Over on the island," Drake mumbled. "Skelton sent him over there. He's one of the SP gunmen. On guard over there."

"Guardin' what?" asked Bill quickly.

Drake's lips shut tightly.

"Better talk, Drake or I'll let you bleed to death," Bill said coldly. "I heard Doc Arnold proposition you. I know that you and the Arnolds and Skeltons and Purcells are all in on a game to get the Slash B. You'll talk and talk the truth or I'll finish the job Doc Arnold started."

"God, Benton, they'll kill me if I talk!"

"I'll kill you if you don't. Where's Buckshot Blue?"

"Doc and Slick Arnold killed him at Bull Island," the cattle-buyer confessed. "Killed his horse and him both. Buckshot knew too damn much. He knew that we were using the island. Old Major Bacon must have let something slip when he was drunk. Anyhow Buckshot was fool enough to swim his horse across to the island about dark one night. They shot him and laid the killing on you. But they never found the body."

"Who killed that man over at the cabin on the island?"

"Doc and Slick."

"Why?"

"He's an outlaw. From Texas. Mixed up in some bank jobs and a train robbery. He had money. Some of it incomplete currency. Some other stuff that needed careful passing. Somebody had give him Doc's name and tipped him off to the island. Slick and Doc have been passing this dangerous money for him on commission. But they held out on him and he was damn fool enough to make a gun play. He was fast but he overmatched himself. Tie my arm up, Benton. I'm bleedin' to death."

Bill tied up the wounded arm, then took care of Doc Arnold who had come to and lay on the floor, his ankles tied, helpless, sullen, defiant. He cursed Bill and Drake through gritted teeth. Drake looked frightened under the glare of the gambler's hard eyes. Bill grinned mirthlessly and went out.

At the barn Bill found a couple of saddle horses and a saddle. He put his prisoners on their horses and headed for Major Bacon's place.

"And if either of you make a break," said Bill, when they were started, "I'll kill you both. Now hit a lope."

## CHAPTER NINE

### A Man's Pardner

HE found Anne there at the ranch. She looked white and her eyes were red as if she had been weeping. She met them at the barn, a 20-gauge shotgun in her hands. At sight of Bill, she lowered her gun.

Bill forced a faint grin. "Every time I show up here, you got me covered. Anne,

lock these two gents up and ride herd on 'em. They're bad medicine. If they get tough, shoot their legs off."

As the two wounded prisoners were dismounted, Anne whispered an anxious question. "Bill, where's father?"

Bill grinned. "Safe as if he was in jail. He's on Bull Island. Somebody stole the skiff and left us there. He likewise got off with the Major's jug. So you'd better give me one to take along when I go back with the other skiff."

Bill tried to pass it off lightly. He made no mention of the dead man. "I swam ashore and captured these two roosters," he explained, "while they were in a pistol argument. Have a good mess of catfish for breakfast, Anne. The Major is goin' to be hungry."

"Bill!" Anne's whisper was tense. She watched Drake and Doc Arnold who stood in the lantern light about twenty feet distant.

"What's the matter, Anne?"

"It's Buck," she said so softly he could hardly hear her. "He's been here and gone. Bill, he's hurt. He looks like a scarecrow. His clothes are just rags and his face is caked with mud and dried blood and matted with whiskers. His eyes are sunken and bloodshot and almost insane. He wouldn't let me bandage his hurts. He wolfed some food and took Paint and a six-shooter and cartridges somebody had left here in payment of a debt. Then he rode away. Bill I'm afraid. If the Major is safe, then stay here."

"I'll not leave you alone," Bill said. "God, Anne, where do you suppose Buck headed for when he left here? Was he drunk?"

"No. He wouldn't take the whiskey I offered him. Said he'd never even smell of a bottle again."

"Did he say anything about where he'd come from?"

"He said he'd just come back from hell. He pointed towards the badlands."

"Then he didn't come in the skiff."

"No. From back in the hills. Bill, I'm afraid. Terribly afraid to stay here alone. Skelton and Purcell came here about dark. Ike Skelton was drunk and demanded whiskey. They acted queer when I said the Major was not here. That he had taken the skiff. Sid Purcell asked if you had been here. I told him no and he called me a liar and called the Major terrible names. Ike Skelton tried to manhandle me. I got away from him and got the shotgun you gave me. He laughed and said he'd be back."

"I won't leave you alone, Anne," Bill promised again.

They locked the prisoners in the cellar, then Bill did his best to quiet Anne's fears. "If I had my way," he said, his ears reddening, "I'd never leave you alone."

And somehow, neither of them knew just how, they were in each other's arms.

"It's been you all the time, Bill," the girl whispered. "Never Buck. But you'd never tell me you loved me. I thought you would if you saw Buck making a fuss over me. But you never tried. . . ."

"Every girl fell for Buck," Bill said. "How was I to know you'd like me? And besides, Buck was my pardner."

"And still is, Bill!" croaked a voice from the doorway.

BILL and Anne, torn from each other's arms by that rasping interruption, stared at the man who stood there in the doorway. A scarecrow figure, ragged, fouled by muck and blood, unshaven, haggard, with eyes sunken into black, bruised sockets. A gun in his hand—and on his face the ghastly grin of a man fresh from hell.

"I saw it all through the window," croaked Buckshot Blue. "I couldn't hear good but I saw. And I was goin' to kill

you both. Until I caught the drift of what you two were sayin'. Now I know where I always stood. Anne, you're the finest girl I ever knew. Bill, you take care of her. And Bill, I'm payin' off a debt to the SP outfit. Skelton and Purcell and the Arnolds and Drake, all tried to murder me but didn't shoot straight enough. Skelton and Purcell are due at Bull Island. They'll show up there before daylight. The sheriff is right behind me. He run into me at the round-up wagon. Old Baldy happened to get red pepper in the sheriff's eyes. Somebody else tripped him and I made a getaway. But the sheriff ain't far behind, with a warrant for you on a framed-up butcherin' charge. Bill, I gambled our spread away but I never stole beef from the SP. Not to sell, anyhow. Baldy told me the whole deal. I got no time to lose. I'm after Skelton and Purcell and the others. They'll be at Bull Island to-night. We'll need the skiff. Where's the Major?"

"At the island now," said Bill. "Buck you stay here and get rested up."

"I got till daylight, maybe, to live," rasped Buckshot Blue. "The Major on the island? Good God! Get the skiff!"

"Get it," said Anne, her lips white. "The extra skiff. I think I understand now the threats made by Skelton. Don't let them kill father."

"Get that skiff," Buckshot said. "Bull Island. Make it damn' quick or they'll get the Major like they got me. Like they got my brother that Judge Burns had a reward notice for. They think there's money planted there. And there's men that'll kill to keep it where it is. Purcell and Skelton and the Arnolds and Drake. Get goin', Bill. Every minute counts."

They were shoving the skiff off when the sheriff and Judge Burns rode up.

Bill called to them. "Stay here with Anne. You'll find Doc Arnold and Drake locked in the cellar. Me and Buckshot Blue are doin' some team tyin'. And we ain't wastin' loops."

And with a grin that was reflected on the haggard, bearded face of Buckshot Blue, Bill Benton pulled down the black current—to keep an appointment with danger—perhaps with death. . . .

"TEAM tyin'," said Buckshot Blue, as the skiff went down the river. "Our last job of team tyin', Bill." Buckshot hid his grimace of pain.

"Team tyin', Buck. We never lost."

"I been lousy, Bill. A drunken, damn' fool sheepherder."

"You lie plenty, pardner."

"No time now to say much," Buckshot said. "Got to save my wind."

"The man they killed at Bull Island was your brother, Buck?" Bill asked.

"Yeah. Twin. Outlaw. Game, but no good. The sheriff had a description that fitted me. Wanted me, so he said at the camp this evenin', for bein' an outlaw. I told him different. He'll get proof of it when he sees the body of my brother. Bill, up till the time I got crippled. . . ."

"Quit talkin', Buck. We're edgin' close to the island. Sound carries."

"Team tyin', Bill?"

"Team tyin', Buck."

"Pardners, Bill?"

"Pardners, Buck!"

Then they were on the island. There was a dead man on the sand bar. The dead man was Slick Arnold, his white face plain in the moonlight. And from a nearby clump of brush came the voice of Major Bacon who was drunk as a hoot owl.

"A case of self defense. And I met the attack as a soldier and a gentleman—with gunfire. Save for a few scratches from this brush, I survived the gun battle unscarred. But the damned scoundrel sent a bullet through his peg leg that is a watermark—a badge—a distinction. . . ."

Then there came an interruption—gunfire.

The Major saw a man in the moonlight, a scarecrow in rags, a blazing six-shooter in his hand. He saw another man. It looked like Bill Benton, standing beside the ragged, swaying man. Bill's gun shot fire. And three other men, near the skiff that had somehow landed from somewhere, were shooting at the scarecrow man and Bill Benton.

ONE by one the three men went down. Now only Bill Benton and the ragged, scarecrow man were on their feet. Bill Benton was holding the other man in his arms, easing him to the ground.

Through the misty alcoholic daze that enveloped him, Major Bacon, who had consumed most of the demijon of whiskey he had found in his skiff that had not been stolen, but removed and hidden in another brushy place, heard words.

"We got 'em, Bill."

"Got 'em, Buck."

"Skelton and Purcell and a killer, Bill." Buck's voice was coming weak. "Tell Wong and Baldy so-long. They never liked me, but it don't count now. Whiskey sure made me loco, after I got crippled. That bad money my brother was trying to pass is in a gunnysack at the Bacon ranch, buried in the manger. Third stall on the right. String your bets with Judge Burns, Bill. The best of everything to Anne and you. You both have it comin'. And whenever you ride up on Benton Butte, think of me."

"You bet I will, Buck."

"We got rid of the SP snakes, Bill."

"We sure did, Buck."

Their hands gripped, there in the moonlight. Bill knew that Buckshot's gun had killed the three men over yonder. Buck had managed to slip the cartridges from Bill's gun, while they came down the river in the skiff. Anne hated bloodshed. Buckshot Blue had known that. So Buck had used his last few hours of life to save Bill's hands from being bloody. Bill knew.

"We always was in the first money, Bill, team tyin'."

"You always was a champ, Buck."

Buck's marred face grinned. His hand slid from Bill Benton's grip. And, after a long time, Bill took off his coat to cover the face of the dead man. . . .

THE END

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**A RENEGADE RIDES WITH THE LAW!**

**A Novel of Tin Stars and Owl-Hoots Along the Border, by**

**HARRY F. OLMSTED**

# Tensleep—Bounty Hunter

By Bart Cassidy

*(Author of "Tensleep—Medicine Man," etc.)*

**Tensleep always has an eye out for a good horse and an ear cocked for the cry of a friend in distress—even when to answer that call he must snake a stolen herd of steeldust ponies from the toughest bunch of renegades in the Snowys!**

THERE'S somethin' about the sound of a shot an' its rollin' echoes that gits deep under a feller's skin, especially when the shot's kinda far away an' the echoes sorta whispery. But when that shot is follered by a dozen more, spaced just right tuh spell a gun duel, the man don't live that ain't either scairt

enough tuh ride away from the sounds or curious enough tuh ride right at 'em. Me—I allus was cursed with more curiosity than good sense.

I'm ridin' north through the Willow Crick Pass of the Snowys; just kinda lazin' along a lonely, beautiful stretch of the Old Outlaw Trail, when that smoky music comes driftin' down a draw.

"Red Eye," I tells my pony, "every time we hear that particular tune, we stick our bill plumb into trouble. If you was a wise fuzzy, you'd take the bit in yore teeth an' hightail straight through the pass to'rds Lewistown. . . . Hey, you bat-eyed jughead, what's the idea? Turn loose that bit an' git along up that draw. We're takin' in the show if I gotta kick a pint uh cider outa yore Adam's apple. Git along!"

So we go hipperin' up that rocky draw until I can hear sounds like a passel uh wildcats combin' out a grizzly's hair. Hoof beats pound away, leavin' someone cussin' behind; then there come more shots an' a scream such as a man only vents when he's dyin'. I rein Red Eye in, augerin' with myself ag'in' goin' on. Plainly the show's over an' the wise thing tuh do is tuh mind my own business an' turn back. But a weak an' trembly cry decides me.

"Dad!" it quavers. "Oh, my God, help me!"

I roar to'rds the sound. "Who's bleatin' fer help?" I holler. "Where yuh at, felfer? Keep yore tail hooked over the dashboard till I git to yuh."

We sweep out onto a little flat, where the draw widens out. An' there is a sight fer sore eyes. A horse is down out there in the middle, tryin' tuh git up on a broke hind laig. Beside him lays a dudish hawss-an'-rope man who's deader'n a sack uh jerky. Still farther out lays a beef critter, half skun out an' partly butchered on the hide. Up on the hillside, croppin' browse like nothin' had happened, is a full rigged pony. And just below him, where the brush line rims the flat, sets a slim-complected cowprod, both hands braced to the ground an' his mouth vomitin' blood. . . . .

Outside uh them things, the place seems deserted. An', figgerin' that bleedin' man needs help more'n the hawss with the broke laig, I lope up to him, light off an' kneel beside him. No man kin bleed like that from the lungs an' live more'n a few seconds. He's young, too damn young to come to his end in a smoky deal like this. I choke up some an' waste a good moment before I can speak. Then:

"Lay over here," I order, an' put my arm under him. He goes limp as I lay him down. Already he's bleedin' less, an' as I slit his ragged shirt an' start goin' over his chest, I figger he's gone. Cripes! Nary a sign of a hole can I find, either front or back. Not only that, but he's breathin' strong an' natural. Nary a sign of a bubble from his nose. Mebby he got piled off his pony an' smashed up inside. Mebby . . . .

I quit figgerin' as he opens his eyes, drags down a long breath an' smiles up at me kinda foolish. The bleedin's almost stopped now, just a little trickle oozin' from the corner of his mouth.

"Sweatin' hell an' horned frawgs!" I blat at him. "Kid, where yuh hit?"

"I think my ear's shot off," he gasps. "Anyhow it hurts like the devil."

I take a look at the ear an' I've got the answer. A bullet has went in his mouth, knocked out three-four teeth an' come out his ear without leavin' a mark on his hide.

"Well I'm a centipede's sister," I mutter, "if that don't beat me. If you ain't dead now, Kid, you'll likely live tuh be hung. Which same can't be said fer this pore hawss out yonder."

ONE bullet from my smokepole puts the pore critter out of its misery. The dead jasper with the dude clothes, lyin'

near the hawss appears to be hard an' sin-pimpled even in death. His hand is still wrapped around the grip of a fancy gun of foreign make that shoots little pea-squirtin' shells with "7M" wrote on 'em. Which shore bears out my contention that fer good, old-fashioned, clean killin', give me the old .44 hogleg, a bullet uh which has bored this feller plumb through.

When I git back to the kid, he's brighter an' only spittin' blood.

"How about this, kid?" I ask him. "Did the late lamented git the trigger slammin' spasms from lookin' at yore rough butcherin'? Or was it his beef?"

"He's a Horseshoe M man," he mutters. "One uh them two-gun terrors from the forks uh Bitter Crick, who claims tuh have God's private permission tuh run ever'body outa these hills. They have drawed up a new code fer the Snowys. Horseshoe M comes first, an' let any man be damned that thinks different. They've wrote it in blood an' sealed it in smoke. Me an' my paw, we've bucked 'em. Shore this is their beef. To them it means nothin'; to us it means the difference between livin' an' starvin' tuh death."

"I savvy, kid," I tell him. It's a old story that I've heard many a time before, an' bucked some in my time. "I take it things ain't goin' so good fer you an' yore dad. Who are you an' where do yuh live? I've gotta git yuh home an' tuh bed."

"I'm Slivers Scantlin'," he says, an' the way he's fightin' pain hurts me plumb through. "I live down yonder on Pinoak Flats—five-six mile away. But, mister, I gotta take some uh that beef back. My paw an' maw need that more'n they need me. Yuh see, paw's crippled, an'—"

"Save it, kid!" I order him, grim. "We'll take the beef with us if we gotta down three-four more uh these Horseshoe M's. By any chance are you Two-by Scantlin's boy?"

"Yeah," he says, interested. "Do you know him?"

"What I know about him," I answer, vague, "ain't no part uh bad in my lingo. Now you rest easy till I git this beef loaded."

As I ketch his hawss an' then skin out the hind quarters an' loins uh the beef critter, I'm thinkin' of the one an' only time I ever saw ol' Two-by Scantlin. That time I was bein' tailed by a blood-sweatin' posse that wanted me fer . . . never mind what. Ol' Two-by an' his missus throwed a bait uh grub into me, screwed my saddle on a fresh pony, tied a fat lunch on the horn an' sent me away on a clean getaway.

Two-by's dugout, over on the Pinoak, was just one of hundreds uh such spots in the days of the Wild Bunch. A little spread off the beaten track, lookin' plumb innocent an' run down at the heel, but claimin' as neat a little bunch uh ponies as a man would care tuh look at—an' every head owned by Butch Cassidy an' his boys. Each feller who ran these spreads lived on the bounty of the Wild 'Uns, an' payed it out with just such a service as ol' Two-by rendered me.

While the Wild Bunch rode, Scantlin an' the rest done fine. But hard times has fell upon 'em, an' from the way Slivers talks, it's a question whether they're eatin' reg'lar. Which sorta puts it up tuh me tuh see that the account is squared some. I'm thinkin' along them lines when I load that beef on my pony an' the kid's, boost him into the saddle an' hold him there as we ride fer Pinoak.

MAW SCANTLIN, who meets us at the dugout, lifts Slivers outa the saddle like he was a baby an' totes him into the house in her arms.

Just a long, angular old hill woman with a brave spirit, a weary face an' a body bent from hard work. But mostly

just a mother. I foller her into the house, comin' to a stop in the kitchen. Settin' before the stove in a cowskin chair, is ol' Two-by Scantlin, lookin' old enough tuh be his own father. He's starin' after his wife, where she's took the boy into a bedroom. Hearin' me, he whirls an' I see he don't recall me.

"Shot?" he croaks, an' when I nod: "Who done it?"

"Some Horseshoe M man."

"Which one?" he blats, leapin' up an' cripplin' to a rifle by the door jamb. "An' where's he at?"

"Oh don't bother," I grin. "Slivers weighted him down with lead an' left him out in the sun fer the flies tuh blow."

That cools him some, an' he takes his seat, groanin'. "Who might you be?" he asks, narrow-eyed.

I tell him, callin' to his mind the one an' only time we met. I don't leave out the gratitude I've allus felt fer that lift, nor my pleasure at bein' able tuh do anything tuh repay it. My words seem tuh give him a lump in the throat. He drags out a demijohn, takes a pull at it tuh ease the ache in his neck. He acts like a bull that's bin whupped outa the herd. I hit the jug with him an' we git organized. We spill a lotta loose lip, with him doin' considerable cryin' over things.

Not about hardships an' danger. Them things don't feaze ol' Two-by. 'Cause he's seen it all an' what he ain't seen, he's heard. But the idea of his family bein' in want an' him helpless from a injured spine is what plumb boogers him down.

"I kin be fixed up, Tensleep," he confides. "But I'll have tuh go back tuh Kansas City. It'll take a heap uh money. We was in shape tuh git said money up to a little more'n a week ago. I had a bunch uh fifty of the best danged steeldust saddlers ever you laid eyes on. Ever' one broke to saddle an' trained tuh stand under rope or gun. Worth a-hundred-an'-fifty dollars in any man's money. They stole 'em! Ever' head, Tensleep. But now . . . now I don't know what'll come of us, with me helpless as a baby an' sonny shot."

"Who stole 'em?"

"Horseshoe M!" he snarls. "That's the answer. Sonny followed the sign an' they drove him back with rifle fire. Next day it come up a rain an' blotted the tracks. Son's bin a-lookin', but it's no use. They're gone."

"They better be long gone an' far," I tell him, mad. "Or I'll find where they're bein' held. In the mornin' I'll ride over to the Horseshoe M an' give a look."

The old man's heavy brows knit in a thick, wrinkled smudge. "Don't you go crowdin' no fight on that outfit, Tensleep," he warns. "They're raw an' tough like bull meat. An' none too folksy tuh boot. No, you keep outa this."

"Like you kept outa my sheriff trouble," I answer, sarcastic. "No, I'll slide over there an' fetch back some good news. An' I won't be gone hardly long enough tuh dirty a shirt."

We talk most all uh that night. Maw takin' turns tuh listen in between reg'lar trips to Slivers' bed. In the mornin', the jug is empty, Slivers is feverish but restin' easy, I'm just oozin' bottled courage. But Paw an' Maw Scantlin are cheered an' feelin' little twinges uh returnin' hope. An' that's a worthwhile cause fer any man tuh get drunk over. We down a big breakfast uh Horseshoe M beef, Maw does me some up in a bandanna fer lunch an' I'm slopin' away.

RIDIN' outa the hills, I've gotta rein in fer a long look at the Horseshoe M. Its big white, buildin's, painted corrals, dark green fields of alfalfa shore is somethin' tuh gladden the eye. A high-toned spread, it flaunts its richness to a range it got rich off of—a monument to

greed. Slowly I ride down the slant, hit the road an' go canterin' past the snooty outfit. At the big painted arch gate I rein in. Tacked to the rail, just below the "No Admittance" sign, is a notice headed "Reward." An' reward dodgers allus stirs my curiosity . . . never mind why.

I poke over to read something like this:

REWARD

One thousand dollars will be paid for information leading to the return of fifty steel-dust ponies stolen from the Horseshoe M. Vented Bar S on right flank. Fresh Horseshoe M under name. For information see

Tom Henning,

Mgr.

Vented Bar S! What a nerve the Horseshoe has got, stealin' fifty steeldusts from Two-by Scantlin an' runnin' their own iron on 'em. An' yet not so nervy mebby, at that, what with likely the best lawyer in Montana drawin' their retainer an' a flock uh perjured witnesses that ol' Two-by sold the critters fer cash-money. Not tuh mention a bill uh sale marked with a cross, since Tom Henning knows ol' Two-by can't read or write.

But fer all their ironclad bulwarks, it seems they can't hold their stolen hawss-flesh. A flush uh admiration fer some cagey long-loop jigger sweeps me, but it don't ease none my feelin's fer ol' Two-by an' his faded wife. An' the kid who damn near give his all so's they could eat. . . . I open the gate an' ride in.

Down near the huge painted barn loaded with baled alfalfa, four men is ridin' like sheriffs is on their tail. Gents with long vizored caps, skin-tight panties that flare at the top, knitted sweaters an' shiny leggin's. Slappin' a little white ball around a field with long handled croquet mallets. I'm settin' Red Eye, tryin' tuh make heads or tails outa the game, when a smooth voice speaks behind me.

"They're pretty good, ain't they stranger?" Another feller togged out thataway is grinnin' up at me with his mouth. But his eyes is dismal.

"Yeah," I nod. "I never seen purtier ponies."

"Ponies!" He snorts. "All mallet-shy and not a ball-hawk among 'em. The men, I was talkin' about. Good as they come, an' a team that'll lift the cup this year at Meadowbrook. Sa-a-ay!" He looks me up an' down. "Can't you read?"

"When it's convenient, I can," I answer, calm. "Readin's what brung me here."

"How's that?"

I hook my laig over the horn. "I pu'pose tuh take yore dare an' make a try fer that thousand simoleons you hone tuh git rid of. You know, fer them fifty steeldust broncs."

He scowls. "What's them ponies to you?" he rumbles. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Me," I smirks, "I'm Pinkerton T. Jones. Stock detective. You've shorely heard uh Pink-Tea Jones?"

"Can't say as how I have," he gruffs. "Stock detective, eh?" He acts like he's pleased, an' tryin' tuh hide it. "Mebby I can use you, at that. We lost them hawsses slick as you please. No tracks, no nothin'—like they'd sprouted wings. Which is a trail blottin' trick of Highline Haigler. Know him?"

"Only by reputation," I confess. "A long-loop jigger from the short grass, an' strong on coyote business."

"You said it," he agrees, bitter. "But I've got my men watchin' fer him. An' when he shows, I'll put him six foot under an' auger it out afterwards. But in the meantime, I've lost a lot of future polo ponies."

"Never say die," I brag. "You ain't lost nothin' until they put Pink-Tea Jones in a wooden overcoat. Except mebby that

thousand dollars. How can we handle this?"

"What do you mean?"

"One man can't drive fifty fuzztails. If I locate this stock an' lead you an' yore men to 'em, do I git the money?"

"Every cent, Jones. An' I might add an extra hundred if we get a chance to rub out that o'nery outlaw an' his band."

"I'll remind yuh uh that," I grin, an' rein Red Eye about. "An' in the meantime, sir, I bid you good day."

I ride away, knowin' that he's lookin' after me with a feelin' that he's really met somebody. Which he has, by cripes! Though I never knowed it at the time, Pinkerton T. Jones is due tuh live a long time in rangeland song an' story. A great stock detective, whose doin's git better an' better with each tellin'.

As I lope away to'rds the hills again, I'm doin' some heavy thinkin'. Highline Haigler! Humph! Long time since I've seen that human coyote an' if I never see him again it'd be too soon—if it wasn't fer that thousand dollars! He's the bull-necked, lyin' son that the Hat Outfit dug up tuh swear my neck into a noose in Chinook. Yeah, Haigler stands up an' swears he seen me steal ponies I wasn't within' twenty mile of at the time.

If Highline Haigler has got Two-by Scanlin's steeldusts, it'll be doubly sweet takin' 'em away from him. But where tuh find him? Highline's allus walked a teetery line along the edge of the law, an' he'll know all the answers an' most of the questions. Which he ain't a lot different from me in them regards. So I put myself in his place in the business uh stealin' ponies from the Horseshoe M. If it was me, there's only two places within strikin' distance that are made tuh order fer holdin' them ponies. Roundup Hole an' Stone Corral. Roundup Hole bein' closest, I head Red Eye thataway.

ROUNDUP HOLE, a ridge-locked valley right close to the west end of the Snowys, ain't such a big place, but it's lush with grass an' water. An' it has but two places where a man can enter on hawssback.

Twilight, rosy as a cardinal's wing, is givin' way to night shadows when I rein Red Eye to the rim of the Hole an' set my saddle lookin' down. The little valley is dotted with hawsses. Yonder, near the toe of the south talus, two long cabins loom black ag'in' a background uh buckbrush.

Before one, a plume uh smoke rises straight as a Injun lance from the cheerful flames of a flickerin' fire. Some feller's squattin' beside that fire with a skillet, gettin' supper. It's a plumb peaceful scene, but it don't fool me none. I can feel the impact of unfriendly eyes an' I knew them eyes are lurkin' behind the sights uh waitin' Winchesters.

It makes me crawly along the spine. An' knowin' I'm in more danger settin' there than ridin' in, I spur Red Eye to the back door uh the Hole an' start down the zigzag trail, bold as dammit. Down near the foot uh the trail a gun noses out of a thicket an' a snarlin' voice comes out.

"Whoa down, hawssbacker! An' lift them dewclaws outa harm's way!"

An' when I do, a dusty, bearded jasper rides out an' lifts my cutter. "Where yuh goin'?" he demands.

"No place in partic'lar," I grin. "Just so it ain't near no sheriffs."

"You dodgin'?"

"By profession," I tell him. "Seems like sheriffs won't try tuh understand me."

He chuckles an' waves his gun reckless. "Ain't that too bad?" he sneers. "Yuh kin take down yore hair an' have a good cry when we git tuh camp. But I'll tell yuh honest, the boss man don't like sobbin'. It makes him killin' mad." Then he glares at me. "Git goin'! An' you'll see."

He rides at my flank, his gun on me all the way. As we ride into the dooryard uh them cabins, a full dozen men climb up off the ground tuh stare.

The guard is snarlin': "Git off yore hawss an' keep yore hands lifted."

When I step down one uh them men comes stridin' up to me, his hands cocked over the two sixes he's wearin'. It's Highline Haigler. I'd recall that brutal face even after I'm dead. Yeah, an' recognize same of a dark night.

"Hello," he coos, staumpin' to a stop before me. "Whatta we got here? A spy from that dude polo pony outfit in the Little Snowys, eh?"

"I take that right unkindly of yuh, sir," I complain, layin' it on thick. "I've bin called everything from a hawssthief to a murderin' renegade, but never nothin' quite so low down as a spy. Would I be overplayin' my hand if I demanded an apology?"

"Oh," he says, sweet as syrup, "not at all, sir."

An' outa no place comes his balled fist tuh clip me on the point uh the chin. My head flies back, my heels fly up an' I hit the ground like a forefooted mossyhorn. Fer a moment I lay there, tryin' tuh gather back what little sense God favored me with. The harsh bellerin' uh that outlaw crew comes like salt in my wounded spirit.

I set up, blinkin' my eyes an' rubbin' my jaw. *Whee-ew!* What a poke in the whiskers that Highline kin dish out. I crawl to my feet, reelin' an' teeterin'. Highline's got his hands locked around his belly an' he's shakin' all over.

"Ho, ho, haw, haw!" he bellers. "Do I overplay my hand if I demand a apology, sezzee? Not at all, sez I, an' let him have it. Ho, haw, haw, ho. Do you accept my apology, pilgrim?"

My anger rises like a dog's roach. "Not at all," I croak, groggy. "Yo're no gentleman."

Highline quits laughin'. He leaps in tuh floor me again. But he's takin' my reelin' a heap more serious than any man orta. I duck an' his swing whistles over my head. It swings him around an' as he struggles tuh git balanced again, I fetch one up from my bootstraps. It ketches him flush on the mouth, rattlin' every skeleton in his family tree, knockin' him flatter than a restaurant steak.

His men are jumpin' around, hollerin', laughin' an' squealin', enjoyin' the show. An' anyway, I purty much know the wild breed an' how they look to their leader to prove his mettle. I stand over blinkin', tooth-spittin' Highline.

"Crawl up on yore laigs, yuh belly-crawlin', yella-striped hunk of bull taller!" I bait him. "An' fetch fer the smoke poles tied to yore hams. Yeah, do that an' I'll spur-rawl yore mangy hide raw. Fer, by hell, I got some war ketched in my whiskers an' I'm cryin' fer somebody tuh comb me out. Git up!"

HE kinda rolls over, his eyes narrowed with rage, his right hand inchin' to'rds his gun. But when he glares up into my eyes, he sees somethin' that changes his mind, just as I figgered he would. Yellow.

"What the hell are you plugs standin' by an' watchin' this bruiser maul me?" he blats at his men. "Hell, he's got science. Drill him, somebody. Git him from behind!"

"Not noticeable," chortles one of 'em. "He's smaller'n you, Highline, by a full head an' twenty-five pounds in weight. Besides which, you got first poke at him. Stand up an' take yore lickin'; we're standin' our hands."

"Spoke plumb noble, gents," I compliment 'em. "An' I ain't forgettin'. Which I'm proud tuh show yore boss up as a

feller long on wind an' short on tucker. I've got a personal ax tuh grind with him when he stands up, so don't go away."

"A personal ax, eh?" asks Highline, from the ground. "Who are you, feller?"

"You orta know me, Highline," I twit him. "You stuck my neck in a noose up in Chinook. Tensleep Maxon, you mind?"

"Well fer cripes sake," he bellers, comin' to his feet. "Why didn't yuh say so in the first place? Humph! You don't booger wuth a cent, do yuh?"

"Not tuh mention," I tell him. "Mostly though I walk right cautious from the holsters down. An' I like my pleasure rough an' raw."

"Don't I know it," he grins, rueful. "Yo're just the kind of a man I'm lookin' fer in this outfit. Soft work an' easy profits. I tries my men out thisaway tuh prove their guts. An' you shore proved yores. I hope you don't hold no bad feelings about the poke in the puss."

"Not so bad as the feelin's I hold ag'in' yore tryin' tuh lie me under six foot uh ground. But let it ride, Highline. How about this easy money you spoke about. I kin use some uh that."

"You'll git a equal split with the rest," he says, enthusiastic. "An' tuh show yuh I mean it an' hold no hard feelin's, I'll cut yuh in on the pleasure party I'm throwin' in Dry Coulee tonight. We drawed straws tuh see who stayed with the spread an' who went. The rest'll go tomorrow night an' then we'll run these ponies across into Wyomin' an' peddle 'em. Now le's all pitch into grub an' git goin'."

An' that's howcome me an' six of the rustlers ride down to Dry Coulee tuh likker up, Highline bein' due to meet us there the follerin' night.

Dry Coulee's just a wide spot in the road with three-four saloons, a big store, blacksmith shop an' livery stable. But their likker's good an' plentiful, which is lucky, considerin' the thirst of the crowd I'm travelin' with. We swings into our third saloon, money in our pockets, the whiskey we've drunk takin' hold, an' our gunbelts let out to the town hole. We down two-three an' one of the bunch starts tellin' how tough he is, windin' up with a song tuh illustrate:

"I run my Bowie in a grizzly's hide,
An' the critter up an' chawed me,
But my blood's so pizen, ol' Bruin died
A second after he clawed me. . . . "

He's on the last notes an' the rest is whoopin' an' hollerin' when I feel somebody pluckin' my sleeve.

I turn around tuh look into a face I ain't seen fer three years an' one I wouldn't mourn none if I never seen again. A crooked tinhorn that keeps heeled by his card tricks an' adds to his pile sometimes by bein' a good judge uh hawssflesh. Way he's dressed, I know he's prosperous; way he looks at me, I know he's got a hen on somewheres. Lafe Lomas, as rotten a aig as ever was spoiled when laid.

"H'are yuh, Tensleep?" he greets me, solemn.

"I wouldn't lie to yuh, Lafe," I tell him. "I'm still sober."

"Come on back to the office," he invites. "I wanta make talk with you."

I leave the bar an' I'm never missed. When the door closes behind us, I set in one uh Lafe's plush chairs, he starts in: "I allus had you figgered fer a lone wolf, Tensleep, but I knowed when you started to recruit a band, you'd be bad news from the forks uh Bitter Crick. I'm shore mightly glad you stopped in here. You an' me can do some profitable business."

"Such as what, Lafe?"

"I've bin watchin' that horse herd in Roundup Hole, Tensleep, not knowin' you was bossin' it. But now that I know, I'm changin' my plans an' makin' you a deal.

How much you want for them fifty head, Tensleep?"

That calls fer some study. "I don't know why I should sell 'em to you," I say, hesitant. "I've as good as got 'em sold right now."

"To who?"

"To the Horseshoe M outfit. You know 'em . . . . at the other end of the Snowys."

He strokes his sharp chin. "If it ain't a secret, Tensleep, what they offerin' you?"

"A hundred a head," I lie. "Cash money an' no questions asked."

"Aw, have a heart, feller," he grins. "Do I look like I was born yesterday?"

"No foolin', Lafe. Fer polo ponies, you savvy? Nobody else'd pay as much."

HE turns his seegar over an' over in his fingers, starin' into the smoke. "I see the angle," he mutters, final. "An' that's a better market than I had in mind. But we still can deal . . . . mebby. You payin' yore boys or are they cuttin' in on the deal?"

"Cuttin' in," I tell him, an' begin tuh see a great light. "You bet we can deal. My cut uh these broncs was tuh be a thousand simoleons. Step that up another five hundred, take delivery in the Hole an' put them noisy jiggers at the bar outa the play an' I'm yore huckleberry."

"Sold," he snaps, an' presses somethin' that tinkles a little bell beyond the partition. A weasel faced kid sticks his head in.

"Tell Mack tuh shake some chloral into the next drink, Ben." Lafe Henning orders. "One on the house."

"Yes sir," nods Ben, an' starts tuh back out when I stop him.

"An' Ben," I add. "Tell Mack tuh shake some more uh that chloral in six bottles uh redeye, same tuh go out. An' when it's fixed, fetch it back here."

He nods an' leaves. Lafe is starin' at me quizzical. "What's that fer?" he asks.

"Tuh take care uh six more in the Hole," I tell him. "Tomorrow night at dark should be the time fer yore men tuh take them ponies out an' head 'em fer the Horseshoe M. An' you better keep these others out until you get the stuff delivered."

He agrees, arranges tuh meet me in the Hole the next night with the money. Then I slide out the back, put the ponies of the six I rode in with in the stable an' spend the night an' all the next day layin' in the brush just outa town, comin' in only to eat. Come sundown, I light out to'rds the Hole, ridin' hard. An' meet three of Highline's men comin' in after me.

"What the hell?" says one.

"They glaumed us!" I bleat, actin' scairt. "I got away. We gotta git them ponies movin' or it's all off."

I keep right on ridin' an' they turn back with me. I pass 'em each a pint bottle uh that fixed likker. An' bein' thirsty, they each kill it, thankin' me kindly fer bein' so thoughtful. Before we hit the Hole, all three of 'em are layin' alongside the trail, dead to the world for at least twenty-four hours.

Highline meets me at the cabins an' he's fit tuh tie. I give him an' the other two boys the same line an' pass out the other three bottles. The two men tilt theirs an' kill 'em. But Highline's cagey. He smells his.

"Knockout drops!" he hollers, an' makes a reach fer his smoke. But not fast enough. When he squares around, he's lookin' into the snout uh my .45, his eyes dilatin' violent. "What's this?" he hollers.

"This!" I tell him, an' pole-ax him between the horns. Them others is standin' spraddle legged, savvyin' what I'm doin' all right but not bein' able tuh do nothin' about it. In five minutes all three are out, with me feedin' Highline his likker as he

comes out of his haze. Cripes, that barkeep musta shore spiked that whiskey.

At nine o'clock Lafe Henning an' his men show up; he pays me fifteen hundred an' we wish each other well. As I top the rim, goin' out, I kin hear 'em whoopin' them steeldusts onto the trail.

All the next day I cruise the high ridges, watchin' that drive. The broncs are hard tuh handle an' they lose some time chasin' bunch quitters. That night they make camp in a boxed canyon where there's feed, water an' two narrow approaches easy tuh hold. Then's when I ride for the Horseshoe M.

There's some kind of a shindig comin' off at the ranch an' I walk in bold as dammit tuh drag the ramrod out. When he sees me, he's interested. Introduces me tuh a lot uh fancy folks as Pinkerton T. Jones, the great stock detective. But there's a deadly light in his eyes as I tell him I've got Highline an' the ponies located—a killer light.

There's the same light in the eyes of the gunmen he routs outa the bunkhouse tuh go along. The ramrod kicks some about takin' the money along, but gives in when I tell him I'm follerin' up another case an' have gotta ride south from where we're goin'.

It's midnight an' the moon is high when we draw rein above the boxed canyon an' walk to the rim. Below us the herd is bunched, the moonlight showin' plain just what they are. Some of the men are rolled in their saddle blankets by the dyin' embers of a fire. But at each of the approaches, the ebb an' glow uh cigarette coals can be seen plain.

"You satisfied?" I ask the Horseshoe M ramrod.

"That's the herd, all right," he says, dubious, "but how do I know it's Highline Haigler's outfit holdin' 'em?"

"You won't know till yuh cross guns with 'em," I tell him. "Skip the extra hundred, pay me the thousand an' let me be on my way. Remember, this ain't none uh my fight."

He don't auger none, bein' too anxious tuh git to his blood spillin'. He pays me in bills an' we all go back to our hawsses. They go one way, I go another. I'm near the brink, a hundred yards down the gulch, when the Horseshoe M's open up. They shoot down the guard at one end without a chance. Then they roar into the camp.

Half of Henning's men die before they're awake. The other half make a fight of it. I see that crooked ramrod of the Horseshoe M go down, an' some uh his men. The steeldusts go mad with fright, stampedin' down the draw an' right over the guard there. An' that's my cue tuh leave.

It's what I figgered would happen, an' I know that nary a head of 'em will stop runnin' till he's back in the brushy hills where ol' Two-by Scantlin raised him.

THE dawn is shootin' long lances uh fire into the westering gloom when I ride into the little town uh Grassrange. After grainin' Red Eye an' fillin' up in a restaurant I buy a little lop-eared pack mule from the corral man an' load the little critter to the eyes with grub. I got all the things I know Maw Scantlin has bin havin' to get along without ever since ol' Two-by swallered Horseshoe M lead—ham an' bacon, flour an' beans, canned tomatoes, peaches an' sardines, cheese an' crackers. Levi's fer Two-by an' Slivers; calico fer Maw. An' a jug uh likker tuh make up fer the one I drunk up.

From the restaurant Chink, I buy a loaf uh bread an' then I put in a phone call to a hawss buyer I know in Fort Benton, askin' him tuh come right down to Pinoak Flats an' make an offer fer Two-by's ponies. He agrees, an' ol' Two-by's Kansas City trip is as good as made.

I take it easy ridin' for Pinoak, sleepin' in the saddle most of the way. When I'm nearin' the dugout an' it's fallin' twilight, I light down, plug one end uh that loaf uh bread, hollow out the soft inside an' fill it with nearly twenty-five hundred dollars in Uncle Sam's crisp currency. It's the only thing tuh do an' I know it. Plain as the Scantlins is, there ain't no prouder people.

Now I'm ridin' on, takin' the last of the slant an' toppin' onto the Pinoak Flats. It's gettin' dark an' I kin see the light gleamin' at me from the Scantlins' lone window. But the western sky is still a soft pearl gray, an' ag'in' it I see a bunch uh ponies standin' on the ridge; their necks arched, their tails bowed. Proud as the old man that reared 'em, they are, an' plumb happy tuh be home, an' free. Too bad a hawss can't allus be thataway.

Maw Scantlin comes out as I ride into the yard. I hear her, "It's Tensleep!" Then ol' Two-by's profane holler from his seat by the stove, echoed by Sliver's thin holler of welcome from the bed. I grin at Maw, swing down an' start unpackin' the jack.

"What yuh got there, Tensleep?" she asks, curious.

"Come in an' look," I devil her, liftin' off a kiack an' totin' it inside.

She follers beside me, an' her an' ol' Two-by is watchin' that sack like hawks. When I've got it plumb emptied an' the stuff piled on the table, the old man's eyes is bright with reproach.

"You shouldn't orta done that, son," he scolds. "Damn it all, you know I ain't got nothin' tuh pay yuh with, an' no chance uh gettin' any."

"What you talkin' about, Two-by?" I holler, mad-like. "This ain't no charity. I'm makin' yuh sign a note fer this stuff. You kin pay it when yuh sell yore ponies."

"I ain't got no ponies, Tensleep. I told yuh. . . ."

"Lissen Two-by," I tell him, stern. "Far be it from me tuh speak ill uh any man. But when Slivers gits on his feet, you better turn him over yore knee an' tan him good. He's gittin' wuthless, that boy. Yore ponies is runnin' their home hills an' gettin' wilder'n deers. An' by the way, Tom Hodapp—the hawss buyer uh Fort Benton—will be up here in a day or two. An' if I was you, I'd sell him them ponies. Let him round 'em up an' you take less. Then you an' Maw an' Slivers go tuh Kansas City an' git yore back fixed up."

I see 'em lookin' at each other an' I slip out tuh fetch in the other kiack. When Maw sees that calico an' them new levis, she starts cryin'. I act stern as a deacon, but my throat aches fit tuh bust as I write out a I. O. U. fer the amount on a piece uh wrappin' paper an' make 'em both sign it. They're sayin', "Yes sir" purty as I fold it up an' pocket it. I go in an' talk with Slivers, find him chipper as a squirrel. Then I shake hands all around an' leave 'em. Fearful Two-by'll tie into that loaf uh light bread before I get Red Eye outa gunshot.

I rocket away from there, leavin' them the mule. Broke an' weary an' wantin' tuh set down somewheres an' bawl like a calf, but happier, I reckon, than I've ever bin in my life.

The night wind is soft; the stars is so big an' bright I can almost reach up an' pluck 'em. Trouble an' confusion worry my backtrail, but happiness, too. An' good friends that'll mention me in their prayers.

Who can boast uh more?

**Tensleep Dodges the Law's Hungry Noose**
**in another fast-moving yarn**
***In the July 15th Issue*** ***Out June 28th!***

# GUN-HANDS FOR

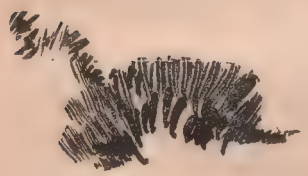
By Harry F. Olmsted
*(Author of "Town Tamer," etc.)*

**To fulfill a promise to himself, Mike Mulvaney rode alone to war against his powerful neighbor rancher, forgetful that the acrid smoke of battle may cloud a man's vision, and that the virus of his own hatred may bring to him a defeat more bitter than could the deadly blast of renegade guns.**

OUT of the tumbled hills, through which Paso San Luis knifes across the Mexican Border, came two riders on lathered ponies. They were traveling northward, pushing their mounts at a killing pace over a steep and little-used cut-off to the Animas Valley. The one who rode ahead carried himself with an easy erectness that belied the weariness of his young, whipcord body. He was almost fair, this stalwart, betraying his Latin blood only by the fierce flame of his dark eyes and by his flair for fine clothes and flashily embellished leathers. Miguel Mulvaney—Don Mike, his friends called him—boasted all the fighting iron of his Celtic

# DON MIKE!

**Novelette of Rio Outlawry**



father; all the dreamy romance of his Mexican mother.

Behind Mulvaney, eating his dust with sleepy-eyed indifference, rode a twisted, bandy-legged little Mexican with scarred face, beady black eyes and unkempt mustache that lent to his peaked face an air of dolorous servility. Tito—he had no other name—looked every inch the part he played. Don Mike's *mozo,* or manservant. One would have looked in vain for an outward evidence of the warrior heart that beat so stoutly beneath his narrow, sunken chest.

Lunging and struggling, the two weary ponies took a last steep slant, topped out on a ridgeback to stand with trembling limbs and straining lungs. Don Mike swung stiffly down, loosened his cinch, then turned his restless eyes downward to the floor of the far-reaching Animas, to what had once been the proudest of the many haciendas between the Hachitas and the Peloncillos. The Reloj de Arena—or Hour Glass brand.

Now the shimmering heat waves distorted the ranch adobes, the dark cottonwoods, the gaunt and spreading corrals, making them dance crazily. For a moment Don Mike was silent, then: "Home," he murmured. "What times I have had there! Such *fiestas,* such *bailes,* when I was young!"

"Young?" Tito snorted. "You talk like you 'ave the white wheeskers 'anging to your knees. Pairhaps, *amigo,* the news that comes to us een Hermosillo, she ees not true. Thees man that shoot your *padre* . . . . pouf, w'at ees a bullet or two? Thees mortgage that the letter speak about, eet may only be a lot of nothing. No?"

"No mortgage is a lot of nothing, Tito mio," answered Don Mike, sadly. "Unless one has the money to pay. They are bad enough when the bank will give a man more time, but when the bank sells the mortgage to a rich *ranchero* who craves to own an entire range"—he shrugged—"then one must have the money or move out." He pointed to the north. Yonder lies the X Bar X, owned by John Randolph who is out to get all this Animas Valley. He holds the paper, Tito, that my father is helpless now to pay. I must raise that money. I must make up to my father for adventuring when he needs me most."

The *mozo* swelled his puny form. "Thees mortgage, Don Miguel, you leave heem to Tito. Thees Señor Randolph, I weel geeve eet to heem."

"You . . .?" Don Mike looked pityingly at the little man he had snatched from under the gun muzzles of a Rurale *ley de fuga.* "Don't be a fool, Tito!"

"A fool?" Tito wagged his head sorrowfully. "Tito, he ees called many theengs, *patron.* But never the fool, *por Dios!*" He patted the big gun holstered at his thigh. "Thees ees Tito's *banco.* Out of eet's vaults, my frien', I have pay many mortgages. You bet me my life."

"Gracias, my brave one," smiled Don Mike. "The thought is worthy of so dashing a *caballero.* But here in the Animas, amigo, there is a law that holds a man to account for his violences. We must think deeper."

Tito scowled, spat. "*Carramba!* I would shoot thees mortgage full of holes and do thees so heavy theenking afterward!"

Don Mike shook his head with affected impatience for this loyal little man who had appointed himself *mozo* to the one who had dragged him from death. Troublesome as he could be, still there was always the element of kindness, gratitude and comfort in his companionship. And always Don Mike put off the fateful day when he would send him out of his life.

With a word to Tito, Don Mike drew his cinch, mounted and dipped downward toward the ranch. An hour later the two of them drew rein in the dooryard of the Hour Glass, Tito lazily curious, Don Mike morosely concerned that the place was down at the heel and showing none of the pride of ownership that had once been a fetish with his father.

It drew a frown to the prodigal's handsome face. The letter that had caught him in Hermosillo had stated that his father was on his deathbed, that he would look again into his son's eyes before leaving to join his beloved señora, dead these many years. Perhaps old Mike Mulvaney was already dead. . . .

QUITTING his horse, he tossed the rein to Tito, strode toward the door beneath the vine-shaded arcade. The door opened to emit Juan Chavez, stern *vaquero* who had once ruled the many riders of the Hour Glass. But he was a strangely aged and sad eyed Juan.

"Juan!" Don Mike said.

"Miguelito!" cried the grizzled servitor. "You have come, *muchacho! El Señor Dios* has answered our prayers!"

Their arms gripped one another in the strong, silent emotion of men.

"*Mi padre, Juan?*" Don Mike asked softly. "My father? Is he . . .?"

"He lives, Miguelito. But only for a sight of thee. Thou must be strong."

With half fearful eyes, Don Mike entered the dark hall, made his way to the darkened chamber where Mike Mulvaney had so long lain helpless. As if he sensed the identity of the one whose steps he heard approaching, the old *hacendado* raised himself feebly to one elbow. His face was little more than a death's head, yet it was transfigured with a smile as the son stood for a brief moment in the doorway.

"Mike!" he croaked, and the weakness of that voice stabbed the prodigal to the heart of him. "Come here to me, ye shpalpeen."

A sob came from the younger man. Could this be the dashing Don Mike who had sired him? Could this be the brawling Irish caballero who was once the toast of an entire rangeland? Beau of the *bailes;* matchless horseman; swashbuckling fighting man? Struggling with his feelings, Don Mike, the younger, moved to the bedside, took his father's wasted hand.

*"Padre,"* he breathed. "I am sorry I was not here to . . . ."

Don Mike, the elder, dropped back on his pillow, his eyes running proudly over the stalwart man who had been little more than a boy when last he had seen him.

"Faith!" he said weakly. "Don't be afther feelin' sorry, me boy. Live yer life to the fullest an' let the divil take the regrits. There'll be an end, me boy, whin ye'll look back to find good in nothing else. I'm glad ye've come home so I can go to yer mither without more delay." He smiled. "Ye're like her, Michael; fair of face, straight of limb, and like yer father in yer strength. I am content . . . . except that I leave ye nothin', Michael, but the old Hour Glass. Shure an' it's a poor bit of an outfit now, me boy. You must rebuild it. You must take up that mortgage from John Randolph. But ye're str-r-rong, ye're young an' ye've the fightin' blood of the Mulvaney's. The Hour Glass will live again with a Mike Mulvaney at the rein. My Mike . . . . an' her's . . . ."

He closed his eyes; a sigh shook him and he lay there white and smiling. That smile fooled Don Mike for some little time. Until the hand he held turned cold in his fingers.

IT was night when Don Mike left the house. Behind him lay a dead man—and a decision. The Hour Glass would live on, with a Mulvaney at the helm.

Tito, smoking with his back against the wall, bounced up to face the one he now called master.

*"Cacacoles,"* he swore. "I thought the bearded one whose neck you fell upon had slit thy throat."

"Juan Chavez?" Don Mike scoffed. "Juan all but raised me, my little one. Juan wouldn't harm a rabbit."

"He looks like a *malo hombre* to me, patron; a bad one. I shall watch him very close. Your *padre,* Don Miguel . . . .?"

"He is gone, my Tito."

"God rest his soul!" murmured the little *mozo,* crossing himself piously. "And now that there ees no *hacendado* for the law to hold eef I shoot holes een thees mortgage, I weel—"

"I am now the *hacendado,"* Don Mike reminded him. "And you, my Tito, I make my *segundo;* the head of all my vaqueros."

Tito swelled his slight form. "That ees good, patron. I weel make of them the most dashing troop een all the Animas. How many ees there of these hombres?"

"None," sighed Don Mike. "Not even one."

The little man slumped, stared. "Not one?" he echoed. *"Carajo,* that ees bad. Ah well, I can pop my wheep, make this old goat of a Juan Garcia stand around, patron. I show heem who ees boss, you bet me my life."

"You let Juan alone, Tito," commanded

Don Mike, smiling in spite of himself. "He is *mayordomo* of the *hacienda.* And will remain so. You and I will look to the cattle, if there are any left. *Mañaña* we will hire some vaqueros, and then we shall see what we shall see."

Tito swelled again. *"Mañaña,"* he echoed, touching the butt of his enormous pistol, "we shall see. And w'at Tito can see, patron, he does not mees."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Don Mike Makes a Call

COUNTLESS cigarette butts littered the patio where Don Mike and Tito sat and smoked the day after the old *hacendado* had been laid to rest beside his olive-skinned wife. Don Mike was busy with a thousand torturing thoughts; too busy to find time to talk. And Tito was well content to drowse, to lazily analyze the lights that ebbed and glowed in the eyes of this new owner of the Hour Glass. And to dream brave dreams to match those lights.

The coming of Juan Chavez broke the spell. As the *mayordomo's* rowels sang their hesitant song into the patio, Tito bounced up to scourge him in precise Spanish. "Your sombrero, billy-goat!" he snapped. "Be pleased to take it off when you approach the patron, else I will have to shoot a few holes in it. And who am I to be blamed if a bullet should go a little too low?"

Juan's patient eyes seemed to narrow as he came to a halt. "Coyote!" he hissed. "Your harmless bark will turn to a howl when the point of my knife pricks your throat. Go crawl in your hole .... Puppy!"

"Puppy?" shrilled the little man. "Tito a puppy, eh? I show you, bleating son of ten thousand mismated goats. I'll ...."

A deadly change came over Tito. Ferocity convulsed him. He seemed to settle, to grow thicker. His right hand flicked to his holster in a blinding draw. But Don Mike had only to snap out his own right hand to arrest it. Tito was snarling at him like a beast as he struggled to shake off that hindrance.

"Sit down!" commanded the Hour Glass boss, forcing the little man into a chair, where he glared at the bristling Juan Chavez. "Juan, take your hand off that knife. If you two cannot get along, one of you must go. And because Juan has been here longest, it is Tito who must ride."

Tito hung his head. *"Perdoneme,"* he murmured. "Your pardon, patron. Thees Juan she mak' me so mad I lose my temper. Don't send Tito away. I weel love heem like a brother .... the goat."

"And I, Miguelito," promised the mayordomo, "am suddenly deaf to his barbed words."

"See that it remains so, amigos," cautioned Don Mike, severely. "And now I must tell you of the future. There is no money, my roosters. I may not be able to pay you ...."

*"Pouf!"* Tito snapped his fingers disdainfully. "Eet ees nothing. Money. I weel steal some."

Juan spat his disgust. "Think you, Miguel, that I would sell my love for our dead patron for gold that a coyote steals? Think you ...."

"Enough," snapped Don Mike, warmed by this loyalty. "You will both stay, and we will steal nothing. First we must scour the chaparral for the big wild steers. To build and drive a herd, we must have vaqueros. Riders who will not want their money until I am paid. Think you, Juan, you can round up a few such men? Say, seven or eight of them?"

"In Animas, patron, there will be men. They will work a month without money. I will go see."

"Good! Do that. And Tito, you saddle

two horses. We ride to the X Bar X to see Señor John Randolph . . . ."

"Of a certainty," answered the *mozo,* jumping up and matching steps with Juan. "And shoot some holes in that mortgage!"

Don Mike gave that last no heed, feeling confident that he could control the little man's bloodthirsty tendencies. He might have been more interested, had he witnessed the sudden chumminess of Tito and Juan, once they were out of his sight. Tito poured a long and guarded harangue into the mayordomo's ear. At which Juan laughed softly, nodded and spoke at some length. Then they both shook hands enthusiastically and parted.

Tito fetched two saddled horses to the rack before the big casa; Juan loped away toward Animas, only to leave the trail beyond the first rising ground and swing a wide circle that took him swiftly toward the Mexican Border.

DON MIGUEL and Tito rode swiftly, skirting the toe of the serrated Animas Range, then they swung westward toward Lomas Prietas—the twin black hillocks that monumented the site of the X Bar X ranch buildings. As they rode, wild cattle darted into the brush, long-horned steers wild as deer, some of which hadn't felt the bite of a reata in many years. But of the tamer strains that Mike Mulvaney had imported to replace the less meaty longhorns, there appeared none. And the answer was plain. Those who had set out to ruin the Hour Glass had stripped the range of those more easily-captured and more salable critters.

The sun bore down, accentuating the wildness of the country. It was as wild as the cattle it harbored, as wild as the cowboys who rode it—a country treacherous of terrain, of temper and of inhabitant. But withal, it was a country of beauty, with its brushy hills, its flower-strewn slopes, its lush grass flats. A man's country . . . . if the man was strong enough to meet its challenge.

The deep green of the *alamosa* and the freshly painted ranch buildings of the X Bar X mocked the sun with its inviting coolness as Don Mike led the way through the high arched gate. And he stared a little enviously at the evidences of care and prosperity that were everywhere apparent. But his admiration changed to sullen resentment as he caught sight of a tall pillar of dust lifting to the north. An X Bar X herd being driven to the railroad. And Don Mike scowled darkly, thinking of how many Hour Glass cattle had been driven so by this grasping outfit at Lomas Prietas.

As the two men from the Hour Glass loped easily into the barnyard, a dozen-odd punchers shifted from positions of indolence to fix them with studied, unfriendly glances. A hard-bitten, gun-hung bunch, of the type that draw high pay for knowing grimmer things than lariat and branding iron.

"A surly and ill-mannered lot, patron," Tito growled in Spanish. "Say the word and I will teach them common courtesy."

Don Mike laughed softly. "Do not lift your hackles, Tito mio. They would take you at a gulp, and without salt. Yonder on the veranda sits a man who will be Señor Randolph. We will do our business with him."

He reined his horse in that direction. Tito following, with answering frowns at the ugly X Bar X hands. No one of those men made a move to arrest their intent. But a man darted swiftly from the stable door to check them. A heavy-shouldered, brutal-browed man flaunting the obvious weight of imperious and unrestrained authority.

"What do you hombres want?" he bawled.

"To speak with Señor Randolph," answered Don Mike, mildly.

"He ain't here. What the hell—you think he's got time fer every damn *pelado* that comes hipperin' in here tuh sell a few wet cattle? What you want?"

"You are the Señor Randolph's mayordomo?" asked Don Mike, striving to keep a tight rein on his anger.

"That's right, feller," snarled the big fellow. "Tonk Wooten. What's on yore chest?"

"My business is not with you, Señor Wooten."

"Oh .... no?" The X Bar X foreman's hand fell to his gun.

Moving with blinding speed, Tito was out of the saddle. "But *my* business ees weeth Señor Wooten," he grinned, and the snout of his long .45 bored into the man's belly. "Go make the talk weeth Señor Randolph, patron. I weel keep thees *cabron* out of, w'at you call, meeschief. And eef hees amigos get playful, *por Dios,* I weel let air through hees gots!"

There was something so startling, so deadly about that swift taking control, as to leave Don Mike quite disarmed. The thing was not according to his plan nor yet to his liking, but he realized that the little *mozo* had made it possible for him to see the X Bar X boss. And, having nothing adequate to offer in its stead, he accepted it, stuck his pony with the spur and loped toward the man on the porch. Looking back once, he saw the big ramrod remonstrating with the stiff-spined little Mexican warrior; saw the looks of impotence on the faces of his stunned followers. Then he was off his horse, his spurs chiming as he strode into the veranda.

Well past middle life, John Randolph at first sight bore the stamp of strength, of rugged character so frenquently associated with the western cattlemen. Square-built, with sturdy jaw and cropped mustache, his appearance tied up perfectly with a reputation of being shrewd, hard and blunt in his dealings. But about his eyes was a weakness that Don Mike caught when still some yards away; a weakness quite alien to John Randolph's title of "the beef baron of the Animas." Randolph was staring with something akin to fear at that tableau down by the corrals.

"What's goin' on down there?" Randolph growled at Don Mike. "What's your man tryin' to do?"

"He's about to put you short-handed, Mister Randolph," answered Don Mike, grimly, "if your men go further with their fine hospitality, your estimable *segundo,* Tonk Wooten, will die. If I were you, I'd call off my dogs, Señor Randolph."

A dull red crawled up from Randolph's neck as he whirled to face Don Mike. "You can't come in here with loose guns an' stand us up like highwaymen. What do you want? Who are you?"

"The name is Mike Mulvaney!"

RANDOLPH started, eyed Don Mike up and down. Then he was nodding. "I should have noticed," he murmured. "You are very like your father. How is ranicky old Mike?"

"My father," clipped Don Mike icily, "is dead! Now, if I were you, I'd call off those killers that draw X Bar X pay."

"Dead?" John Randolph's face went blank. Then, as if just registering the younger man's order, he turned toward the corrals. "Tonk!" he shouted. "Leave that fellow alone. Let him do as he pleases."

"Yo're all wrong, boss," Wooten's cry came drifting back. "The boot's on the other foot. An' if he does as he pleases, he'll shoot me so full uh lead that I'll dent the ground when I fall."

Don Mike laughed. "It's all right, Tito," he shouted. "Get on your horse and ride up here to the rack." And when the *mozo* had mounted, Don Mike turned again to face Randolph. The cowman was staring.

"My father died of a bushwhacker's bullet, Señor Randolph."

"I'm sorry," the cowman said. "Mike Mulvaney wasn't exactly my friend, though I never could understand why. Seemed to think I was conspiring to ruin him . . . ."

"Didn't you?" snapped Don Mike.

Their eyes locked. "You mean?" Randolph's tone was incredulous. "You mean you think I had anything to do with . . . . with his death?"

"Didn't you?" spat Don Mike again.

Hot words dammed up behind the cowman's lips, but he didn't vent them. Behind him a door opened and a girl stepped out. About her was none of the gangling immaturity or shy bashfulness of girlhood. Rather her vibrant beauty was one of self-certainty and secure poise. Her sturdy body and look of solidity were all Randolph, yet she had none of the cowman's weakness about the eyes. She was smiling now at this straight, sullen stalwart from an enemy outfit. But something she read in his direct glance took that smile from her lips. Pride showed in her, and her chin tilted up.

"Honey, this is Don Mike Mulvaney, of the Hour Glass," John Randolph said. "Mulvaney, my daughter, Dell."

Don Mike bowed low, sweeping off his wide hat. The girl was smiling again.

"Don Mike Mulvaney," she repeated in her low contralto voice. "I didn't know that the elder Don Mike had a son. In fact he and father quarreled so savagely when he was here that I never had a chance to know anything about the Hour Glass, except that father was accused of stealing their cattle. It's silly for neighbors to quarrel, don't you think so, Mister Mulvaney?"

Before she had finished, something had happened to Don Mike. It happened also to Dell Randolph. Some unquenchable flame surged through their veins in an intoxicating tide as their eyes met. His eyes were daring; her's dancing. His face reflected the turmoil of the words he had come to speak, yet somehow could not; her's was flushed with romantic excitement.

"Quarreling," he said, "is unhappy business, señorita. I trust there will be nothing between us that will make us quarrel . . . . ever." He turned to her father. "Señor, I came to talk about the note you hold against the Hour Glass. I am putting vaqueros out to comb the range. I will build a herd, drive it to rail and make all possible haste to take care of the obligation."

John Randolph inclined his head. "I wish you luck, Mulvaney. But if you don't succeed . . . . don't worry."

Don Mike bowed, turned upon his heel and strode to his horse. Inwardly he was struggling with his anger, aroused at what he felt to be hidden barbs in the cowman's last words.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Guns on the Trail

TWO days went by without word of or from Juan Chavez, mayordomo of the Hour Glass. Don Mike was frankly worried and just at the point of riding to Animas after him, when the man rode in. He was red-eyed from sleeplessness, drawn and weary. His horse showed signs of hard travel. But the smile that he turned on Don Mike, and then upon Tito, held no hint of failure.

*"Dios!"* swore the Mulvaney, "you are as slow, Juan, as if you had ridden a burro. Where have you been? Luz, your *esposa*—your wife—has been mad with worry and I have slept none too well thinking about you."

"Ha!" chortled Tito, scornfully. "The old goat looks like he has stared too long into a glass of tequila. It is only I whom you can trust, patron."

Juan gave no evidence that he had seen the little warrior wink at him. He nodded his head mournfully and confessed: "He is right, Miguelito. A glass too many makes a fool of a man. I—"

"But the vaqueros, Juan?" interrupted Don Mike. "You forgot them?"

"Nay, patron. They will be here when *El Señor Dios* wills it. They celebrate the fiesta of Santa Catalina and will not come till the last *baile* is held. *Por Dios,* these fiestas get into a man's veins. Forgive me, Miguelito, and do not complain to my faithful wife. Her anger is like the stampede of many steers."

Don Mike forgave him and sat down to await the expected coming of help with ill concealed impatience. Time was so short, and there was so much to be done. Two days went by and Don Mike was fuming. Then, late the following night, he was awakened by the thunder of hoofs, by soft laughter and by queries in the Mexican tongue. He was on the point of getting up, when he heard Tito's shrill blasphemy, ordering the riders into the bunkhouse where provision had been made for them.

When Don Mike arose in the dawn, it was Tito who led a motley crew to the veranda to meet him.

"Patron," he gestured grandiloquently, "the 'elp, she 'ave arrive. And, *Dios de mi alma,* w'at you theenk?"

"*Quien sabe?*" grinned the young Hour Glass boss, looking over as barbarous a crew of eight unkempt cutthroats as he had ever seen. "What is a man to think of such scoundrels?"

Tito held up a cautioning hand. "For looks they are not w'at you call prize winners. But why should they be, patron? I myself am no beauty. And are not all of thees men my *relativos? Cuñados, primos and sobrinos* — brothers-in-law, cousins and nephews, Don Miguel. And thees *picarote*"—he laid his hand on the shoulder of a grinning giant who would make three of him—"thees ees my brother, Arturo. All are good men, patron. They ride like the weend, speen the rope like 'ell and each one ees the shooting fool. *Seguro!*"

Don Mike's eyes danced. "Your relatives, eh? Humph. You vouch for them?"

"*Seguro que si*—you bet me! I get the work out thees fellow, I tell you, or make weedows of some of the mos' beautiful señoritas een Mexico, *patron.*"

"Thirty a month and their food," said Don Mike.

Tito snapped out a query in Spanish, one that contained far more of command than of interrogation. To a man, they grinned, murmured, "*Bastante*—it is enough," and grinned up at Don Mike.

Thus was the Hour Glass full handed again.

ROUNDUP! Wagon camp at Ensenada Grande, the huge bowl hemmed by rocky steeps that made it a perfect corral, save for the boxed entrance. They rode long circles through the brushlands, chousing out the wild cattle out of the brush and into the trap. Some of the old mossy-horns must perforce be necked down to wear themselves out before they would drive. Then came stink of cottonwood smoke and burnt hair, where the cut was trimmed and the trail brand run on.

Skillfully, with all the tricks of the rough-country cowboy, the new hands went at the wearying, nerve-wracking chore, amazing Don Mike that he had been able to secure so able a crew, delighted at the growing tally in the *ensenada.* At night, when they had filled their empty bellies at the chuck wagon of Juan Chavez, the Irish-Mexican would sit beside the campfire with pencil and paper, figuring out each new milestone along the hard trail to the satisfaction of the mortgage. And, despite his constant fight against it, he was seeing the lovely face of

Dell Randolph among the scrawled figures, in the dancing embers of the campfire or smiling down at him from the cold stars.

In his guard time, he rode back and forth across the gateway, dreaming over every inflection of her voice as he had first heard it, fighting a bitter fight with himself to oust the ugly thought that she was the daughter of the man who had slain his father. If not actually with the gun, at least with the money it took to buy a murder.

With a sly and knowing smile, Tito watched this fight of Don Mike's, even to the point at times of denying himself the fierce pleasure of lifting his thin voice with those of the crew as they bellowed the obscene, rollicking songs of the Mexican outlands.

Riding, roping, sweating and swearing, the work went on. The herd grew until nearly a thousand head of cattle milled in the huge natural corral. There was no feed for them here and they must be started to rail. The vaqueros were beginning to grumble at the way Tito drove them. Don Mike warned him, lest they lose so good a crew.

"Lose heem, *patron?*" Tito looked surprised. "Don't worry about that. Thees *picarotes* work for one month. Tito see to that."

One of the men in particular growled and grumbled and became increasingly ugly. It was the giant Arturo, the one Tito claimed as a brother. He was sullen, keeping sullenly to himself the night before they outstrung the cattle. Don Mike watched this big one closely, but Tito seemed unconcerned, telling of mighty feats of man-stuff and bawling his lewd songs far into the night.

The start was made at dawn, the cattle making a mad rush for freedom that took the best efforts of the whole outfit to stem. From the first, bunch quitters gave trouble, slowed the pace in the searing afternoon heat and choking dust. Juan Chavez leading the way with the chuck wagon, Don Mike and another rode point, with three men on each swing. Tito and the sullen Arturo brought up the rear, snarling at each other.

Thus ten miles. First stars showed through the lingering twilight. Juan's campfire twinkling cheerily, inviting the vaqueros to snatch a bite on the run and then get back to the nervously milling herd. Don Mike gave the order for double guard; there would be little rest this night for weary bodies.

At third guard time, Don Mike tossed restlessly where he lay upon the ground near the wagon. He was aware of some subtle hint of danger that rode the cool night breeze. The cattle refused to bed, bawling from thirst and the urge to once again track their brush fastnesses. A crescent moon hung low in the west, slanting its puny beams over tawny backs and glistening horns. Somewhere one of the vaqueros sang a soothing plaintive Mexican air to the bunched beef . . . .

A sudden gun blast rocked the night with ugly echoes. The singer ended his romantic lyric with a shrill scream of pain. For an instant there was a breathless hush, then it was broken by the sky-reaching run-bawl from the herd, and by the shrill coyote yelps of the night raiders, who suddenly debouched upon the flat with hard-spurred mounts and flaming guns.

At that first report, Don Mike came up, clawing for his gun. In the succeeding hush, he stood flattened against the wagon, listening, striving to locate the danger. Then, as hell broke loose, he flung himself to his pony and hurtled into the saddle. The flash of guns was steady now from the hillside. Somewhere Don Mike could hear Tito's shrill and blasphemous commands above the awful thunder of hoofs,

above the deafening clash of horns as the cattle swept away in stampede.

Don Mike sank the spurs, calling upon his pony to head that streaming bovine tide. He heard Juan Chavez cry out behind him, heard the strident *crack* of his Winchester. Twisting in the saddle, he glimpsed four masked riders bearing down upon the camp, emptying their guns into the wagon where Juan was forted.

With a curse, the Hour Glass boss swung his pony, spurred toward them as he shook four swift loads from his pistol. He swore with satisfaction as he saw one of those riders reel in the saddle, his horse plowing its nose into the dirt not three strides from the still blazing campfire.

One of the other three whirled his mount, clawed the wounded man into the saddle and spurred away. Not caring to waste his last shot on them, Don Mike rocketed into camp, lit running and stooped over the fallen horse. Juan Chavez leaped down from the wagon, ran to him.

"What is it, Miguelito? What fiend's mark is on that dead *caballo?*"

"X Bar X!" Don Mike swore. "John Randolph!"

"Look out, *muchacho!*" Juan's eyes had suddenly filled with terror. *"Dios!"*

Face convulsed, the old mayordomo was lifting his long gun. Don Mike whirled, swinging his gun. Two of those bandanna-masked riders were roaring back, firing as they came. Don Mike's senses seemed to explode in an enveloping sheet of white flame and dancing colored lights, he sank down, his last conscious impression the thunder of hoofs and the harsh snarling of pistols.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A Girl Rides

WHEN Don Mike came back to this world, he was in his bed at the Hour Glass. The kindly, concerned face of Luz Chavez, wife of the mayordomo, loomed out of the fog before him. He was weak and shaky, but there was no pain beneath the heavy bandage around his head.

"You have been very sick, patron," murmured the buxom Mexican woman.

"How long, Luz?"

"Three days, Miguelito. Doing much swearing about that X Bar X rancho. *Si,* and much grieving about Señorita Dell Randolph."

Don Mike flushed, squirmed restlessly. "The cattle, Luz?"

"Safe, patron. Juan and the boys have driven them to Animas . . . . hark! There they come now!"

Hoofs roared in the dooryard; there came the dull murmur of many voices and tramp of boots. The wizened face of Tito showed at the doorway of Don Mike's chamber, and behind it, the solemn visage of Juan Chavez.

The little *mozo* came swiftly forward. "The saints be praised, you are better, Miguelito! And the news I fetch will put you on your feet. Tito and his brave vaqueros—we have save half the stampeded cattle—five hundred head, patron. We drive them into Animas and sell them to a buyer. *Seguro que si,* and get the money. *Valgame,* what a very devil of a fellow is Tito!"

With a flourish, he tossed a paper to Don Mike's hand. It was a check for fifteen thousand dollars. Not enough, but sufficient to pay off half the mortgage and leave a working capital of five thousand dollars. He tried to express his thanks to the little man, and to the smiling Juan who stood with one arm about his señora. But the words wouldn't come, and Don Mike just lay there silently pressing the knotty little fingers of his self-appointed *mozo.*

When at last he spoke, it was to tell Tito to take the money again into Animas, to bank it and to leave word at the X Bar X

that he wanted to speak with the Señor Randolph here at the Hour Glass regarding payment of the obligation. Then he fell asleep.

Next day Don Mike dressed. The men were lazing about the place, and the young ranchman smiled at them in great good humor. Things were coming along, thanks to them. And to himself, Don Mike promised them the biggest celebration of their lives if they recovered the lost cattle and rounded up enough more to put the Hour Glass in the clear. But among the men, he looked in vain for the sulky, sullen face of Tito's brother, Arturo.

When the *mozo* came loping back from Animas, Don Mike braced him. "Arturo?" he asked. "Is he not here?"

Tito grimaced. "Arturo," he murmured, "he hear hees *esposa* calling. He can stay no longer. So he go to hees wife."

He shook his head sadly and little did Don Mike suspect that Arturo's wife had been dead these many years, that Arturo had reverted to type and succumbed to the temptation of profiting in Hour Glass cattle.

"But his pay, Tito?" insisted Don Mike.

"I pay heem," nodded Tito. "Just what he have coming. No more."

And he added to himself that had Don Mike been conscious at the time, he would have heard the shot.

LATE that afternoon, John Randolph loped to the Hour Glass. With him was Dell, his daughter. The cowman was gravely cool, the girl blushingly conscious of the pale Irish-Mexican who had summoned them.

"We got your message, Mulvaney," began the cowman, when they were seated on the veranda, "and came at once. Your man said you were in bed; not serious, I hope."

"A bullet crease on the head," confessed Don Mike, coldly. "Only an eighth of an inch from being a matter of rejoicing for the X Bar X. Had your men who attacked me in my trail camp been better shots—"

Slow anger and resentment burned in Randolph's face.

"Can you prove your attackers were my men?"

"I killed one of their horses. It carried an X Bar X."

"Probably stolen. I deny that my outfit has ever harmed you. If you believe this rubbish, you have legal recourse. Why did you invite me here—to insult me?"

"To pay you!" retorted Don Mike, handing him a check. "We saved half our cattle after they were stampeded, and sold them. I am prepared to pay you ten thousand dollars. The rest will be in your hands when we gather the lost cattle and take another drive through."

"I am glad to have some kind of a payment from the Hour Glass, Mulvaney," said the cowman, wearily. "The time's short on the mortgage, however. You have ten days on the balance, if I remember right. If you see you can't make it, let me know and I'll try to get you an extension."

"I don't want it," clipped Don Mike. "I'm in a fight I intend to win, Randolph. But remember this, after that bushwhack play the other night, it's war between our outfits. I won't tolerate X Bar X men on the Hour Glass. And it will be death for your outfit to further interfere with my business."

Randolph sighed and nodded. "Come on, Dell. Good day to you, sir."

He strode toward his horse, stiffly angry. But Dell tarried, her blue eyes pleading. "Please don't be too quick to condemn daddy," she begged. "He's having his own troubles, but I know he hasn't done the awful things you think. Can't you be patient . . . . and charitable?"

There was admiration in Don Mike's

dark eyes as he bowed low. But no softening of the brittle hardness of him. "For you, señorita," he murmured, "there is nothing I could not be."

Suddenly her fine eyes were tear-filled, as if she sensed that he mocked her. She turned away quickly, strode after her sire. As the Randolphs rode away, Tito stepped from the porch vines, his pinched face twisted in a grin, his chuckle musical.

"The heart, patron," he twitted, "she ees a fonny theeng. No? W'en eet ees near eet's *querida,* eet's loved one, eet ees 'ard as the fleent. W'en eet ees far away, eet ees soft as the flesh of the señoritas. And, *valgame,* w'at a rein eet ees on business!"

Don Mike swore softly. "I wish she belonged—anywhere else than on the X Bar X."

Tito shrugged. *"Quien sabe?* Who knows, she may belong here on the Hour Glass in the good time of *El Señor Dios.* Now about thees mortgage, patron. We shoot heem half full of holes; w'at of the other half?"

"Same thing!" snapped Don Mike. "We have ten days more, my little one. Ten days to gather another five hundred head, deliver them and get the money to Randolph. Then we are out of the woods."

*"Pouf!"* Tito drew himself up proudly. "Eet ees nothing, patron. Conseeder eet done." He whirled to the bunched men down by the corrals. *"Adelante,* my lazy peegs and sons of peegs! *Vamanos!* We ride *por* the heels .... and more cattle."

IF the first gather had been hard, gruelling work, this second one was plain hell. The cattle were wilder and scarcer. But so hard did Tito drive his grumbling vaqueros that in five days they had as many hundred salable beef critters bunched in the *ensenada* and ready for driving. Though Don Mike came out and attempted to take part in the work, he found himself not quite up to it, and spent most of his time at the dutch ovens, thus freeing Juan Chavez to ride with the crew.

But when the cattle strung out in the drive, he was at his place at point, quite recovered and joyously hopeful. There was yet five days left, only two of which were needed for the drive. Animas was full of cow buyers and the market was brisk.

Two days on the trail. Two nights in camp, with every man watching the herd and guarding against surprise. But there was no night attack, no trouble of any kind. And at mid-forenoon of the third day, the cattle were in the Animas loading pens. Then Don Mike made the rounds, looking for a deal. The first buyer he met was sorry. The market was wavering, the price unsteady. He wasn't interested. Another had bought up to the limit. Still another wanted nothing but shorthorns.

In the knowledge that someone had been to these men before him, Don Mike steeled himself. He was a man of direct thinking, whose thoughts become a torment unless translated into action. He got on the wire. Buyers in El Paso clamored for the beef and proved his suspicion of X Bar X interference.

He made his arrangements. Cars were available. He put Tito and the crew to loading and strode into the town to keep his growing discouragement from the men. There was not enough time to ship the herd one hundred and fifty miles, get the draft back and pay off Randolph. It looked hopeless. After receiving the railroad agent's promise to expedite the shipment, he turned wearily into a saloon.

The bar-room was almost deserted, so Don Mike took a table in a gloomy corner to sip a glass of beer and relax. He was still there poring over his chances an hour later when Tonk Wooten, ramrod of the X Bar X, came in with two of his gunmen. There, opined the Irish-Mexican, was the reason local buyers were not buying

Hour Glass cattle. The men drank and left the place without noticing him. And a few moments later, Don Mike left to return to the loading.

As he walked, he became conscious of a galloping horse coming along the street behind him. He heard his name called, whirled as Dell Randolph hurled her horse to the edge of the walk, lit down and ran to him. She was pale, her eyes afraid.

"Oh, God!" she breathed, coming to a stop before him. "How glad I am that I have found you. I rode to the Hour Glass first, and—"

"What are you doing here in Animas?" he broke in.

"Dad sent me to find you. It's Tonk Wooten, his segundo. He locked daddy and me in a room, threatened us with death, and boasted that he was going to own the Animas and its cattle business. . ."

"How?" demanded Don Mike.

"He claims to have bought out daddy's eastern associates with money received from cattle he has stolen from the Hour Glass, from the X Bar X and from other valley ranches. He threatens to kill daddy and thus acquire the rest of the X Bar X. He and his men rode away to stop the train you are shipping cattle on, steal the beef and prevent you from getting the money to take up the mortgage. He locked us in, with a guard over us. But daddy had a gun hidden. There was a fight—and daddy was wounded, but he killed the guard. And then I rode . . ."

*"Dios!"* breathed Don Mike. "Quick! We must stop that train. Come on!"

HE broke into a run toward the loading chutes. The girl mounted her pony and loped up beside him.

"Jump up behind!" she called, reining in.

He vaulted up behind her, put his arms about her as she jabbed home the spurs and put her mount into a swift gallop for the yards. But already they were too late With a last shriek, the train started. Slowly at first, then gathering speed. When the horse bore Don Mike and Dell Randolph to the tracks, it was speeding swiftly to the east. Carrying all of Don Mike's hopes toward waiting doom.

Don Mike spoke. "Across the tracks, Dell. We'll get Tito and the boys. They can take a cutoff through the hills and catch this coyote at his tricks. Rein for that chute yonder."

They whirled around the empty pens and Dell drew rein.

"Where are they?" she asked, puzzled.

For an instant, Don Mike said nothing. A deadly uneasiness gnawing at him. His own horse still drowsed at the corral fence. It was alone. Tito and his strange *relativos* were gone. Where?

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "We must have missed them. Ride back uptown. I'll catch you."

He slid down, ran to his horse. Together, he and the girl rode the length of the main street. There was not a single Hour Glass horse at the racks.

"What will you do?" she asked, concerned.

"Ride through Bear Canyon and try to stop that steal," he replied, his jaw muscles bulging. "It is not the cattle, they rob me of, but the Hour Glass itself."

"But you're all alone," she remonstrated.

"All alone," he admitted, bitterly. "But for all that, I must beat them. I promised myself that the Hour Glass will go on. And, *por Dios,* I'll keep my promise!"

He stuck his pony with the spurs and galloped swiftly away, heading for the far notch of Bear Canyon, along the trail that cut the big swing of the tracks.

For a fleeting instant, the girl stared after him. Then, with sudden resolve, she

put her pony into a swift gallop. It took her several miles to overtake him.

"You've wasted too much time to cut them off through Bear," she cried, roaring up beside him. "Apache Gulch is some longer but it puts you closer to Puente Bridge, where they stop the train. Go that way. . . . Please!"

She was right. Her mention of the place where the steal was to be undertaken made him see it. He nodded, changed direction, but said nothing. And Dell Randolph matched his pace, the shadows of this grim business glooming her fine eyes.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### In the Shadows

TWICE during that ride, Don Mike twisted in the saddle to order the girl to return to her home. Twice her eyes rebuked him and they rode on. Into the maw of Apache Gulch, and winding up the sinuous draw toward the ridge that frowns above the railroad tracks at Puente Bridge they rode. Don Mike put his mount into a walk to spare it as they climbed that last steep pitch. He was stiffly anxious for the first glance over the rim, and that very nervousness saved him.

His first glance was not of a stalled train and of cattle being unloaded. But of a saddled horse grazing not a rod away. The glint of a gun at the edge of the brush and Dell's scream sent simultaneous streams of warning coursing his being. Desperately he drew back, snatching at his scabbarded carbine.

A gun crashed, and lead clipped the rein he held in his left hand. His horse reared and Don Mike heaved himself overside. He landed heavily, hurled himself to face the bushwhacker threat. His assailant fired again, the bullet screaming off a stone not a foot from Don Mike's face. Then the Hour Glass boss was shooting.

He saw the man roll from his first slug, partially protected by rocks and brush. Anticipating that movement he fired again, wringing a cry of pain from the assassin. Then the fellow was on his feet, coyoting through the brush. A few moments later he heard a body thrash out there. And as he loaded, Don Mike walked to the body. It was one of the hard-faced gunmen he had seen on his lone visit to the X Bar X.

As he left the brush, he heard Dell cry out again. She was coming toward him, leading his pony. She pointed below, where a man was running from the tracks. Don Mike levered in a shell, dropped to one knee and let go. The range was long and he missed. The man flung astride, spurred away desperately, with Don Mike flogging him vainly with rapid fire. The Hour Glass boss loaded his empty gun. His eyes were hard and bitter; waves of loneliness and despair engulfed him.

"I see now," he told Dell, harshly, "why you were so anxious for me to come by way of Apache Gulch. What a fool I've been to even half trust one from an outfit that hates like the X Bar X."

The girl's face went terribly white. Her tiny cry seemed to plumb the suffering of the human soul. Her hands flew up to cover her face and her slender body was wracked with silent sobs.

She lifted her contorted, dry-eyed face. "You think that I . . . I . . ."

She stumbled, couldn't go on. She searched his grim face; could read nothing there. Her heart cried out, calling for some sign of his belief in her. But, from his cold eyes he had none to offer.

"What do you expect me to think?" he asked, wearily. "Yonder lies one of your men. It is not your fault that he didn't kill me like he did my father. Go home —before I come to hate you!"

Dell Randolph drew herself up, sustained by a silent pride. Between two fires, she shuddered from the impact of tragedy she had never imagined. She faced him bravely.

"No!" she said, stubbornly. "I will not go home. You accuse my father and me of unspeakable things. We are innocent, I tell you—innocent!" Her voice rose. "You will not try to see or understand. You seal yourself in a shell of lone-wolf self-importance. You destroy yourself by keeping to that mistaken belief. I should ride away and let you be destroyed. But—I cannot! I'll put up with your cruel charges; I'll invite your hate, but I'll stay . . ."

Her inner tumult expressed itself by a swift and breathless running together of words. And Don Mike thrilled to the beauty of her, to her shining pride. What a woman to love and be loved by, if only . . . He shrugged, and swung into the saddle.

He led the way down the hill at a gallop, lit down near the end of the bridge. With hurried steps he moved to the east approach. A shovel was stuck there, right where the running man had left it. And beside it was a box of dynamite, caps and fuses. The stuff told its own story. Ignited by the locomotive, the charge would roll the engine over the embankment, carrying the cattle cars off the track to crash into the deep *barranca* alongside the trestle.

Don Mike lifted his eyes to the girl who stared down at him. "This," he allowed icily, "was not to be a steal, but destruction. Wanton murder of a train crew and destruction of my cattle. The X Bar X, it seems, will stop at nothing."

"Tonk Wooten," she corrected, softly. "Not the X Bar X. Sometime you will accept the truth . . . and be sorry."

Don Mike said nothing as he dragged the powder into the brush close by and filled up the hole between the tracks. When he had finished, he looked to the loads in his carbine, led his horse into the brush, took up a position behind a pile of ties near the bridge end.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Wait for the train," he answered, tonelessly. "It should be along any moment now. There will probably be no attempt to stop it, because this was to be a shambles, not a cattle steal. If that train goes through, I've still got a chance to win."

"Pray God it goes through!" she said, reverently, and dismounted to sit beside him on the ties.

But the train didn't come. And with each passing minute, Don Mike's uneasiness increased. An hour passed. Two. Don Mike rose and retrieved his horse.

"They've outfoxed me," he announced, his voice bitter. "They've stopped the train somewhere else while you guided me here."

DELL cringed, hung her head. She made no answer and Don Mike spurred his pony up the hill again, with the girl right with him. A half hour later, they were on top, their eyes following the big sweep of the railroad tracks to where smoke rose lazily from the dark green line of the bosque of Bear Creek.

"That's the train," cried Don Mike, and lit out.

Side by side they raced down the hill, across the flats and into the timber. The cattle train lay idle on the tracks, the engine puffing lazily. The door of every cattle car was open, the beef gone. The train crew, trussed up in typical range fashion, were laid out in a row beside the track. Don Mike cut them loose.

"What happened?" he asked.

"A masked *hombre* come over the tender," answered the grizzled engineer, "and put a gun on us. Made us stop in here. A masked gang swarmed over us, tied us

up like pigs, an' unloaded. They drove 'em away, whoopin' an' shootin', travelin' south to'rds the Border. By the time you get the sheriff on their tails, they'll be in Mexico. I'm afraid you've lost your cattle, young man."

Don Mike nodded without emotion. "You don't know the half of my loss," he said, and hunkered down to roll a cigarette with trembling fingers. With the train crew getting up steam for the run eastward, Don Mike sat there smoking, staring into the west, preaching to his troubled spirit the code of Old Mike Mulvaney —"Don't crow; don't whine; don't crawl. Play your cards to the limit of their worth, winning thankfully, losing bravely."

The engine's whistle, the jerk of car couplings roused him. He rose to the saddle and Dell came riding from close by to join him. He looked at her quizzically. Why did she stick so closely? In the light of recent happenings, he could be forgiven for doubting her every word, every action. Yet somehow now he felt a touch of embarrassment as she lifted her welling eyes to his.

"I am sorry," she told him, fervently. "There must have been something Wooten didn't tell me. If you had your men, we might beat them to where they're driving."

"For what good?" he asked, with bitterness. "The cattle are just the ante in this game. The Hour Glass are the stakes being played for. Your father will own it now. I hope he hasn't cursed it with the method he took to acquire it. For after all, my father and my mother are buried there."

"What will you do?" she asked, a little breathlessly.

"Ride to Animas to get drunk. Drink until my money is gone. Then"—he shrugged—*"Quien sabe?"*

Her face contorted. "Is that a man's way?"

"A man's way has failed," he snarled. "And what do you care? What does anyone on your outfit care? Go on back to your father while the light still holds. Go to your X Bar X . . . and your Hour Glass."

If he had struck her he couldn't have hurt her worse. Tears popped into her eyes and her cry was wrung from the heart. "Oh, you fool!" she wailed. "You impossible fool!"

She whirled her pony angrily, sank the spurs and roared away toward the far X Bar X.

Don Mike watched her go with strange apathy, the slight drop of trouble it added to his already brimming cup of woe meaning little. He had lost. He had failed to hold the ranch old Mike Mulvaney had spent his life in building. And toward Animas he rode, communing with the devils of a troubled spirit.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Into the Light

ALL night, the following day, and into the second night, Don Mike Mulvaney haunted Animas bars. He drank silently and alone; he drank to forget . . . and he never quite succeeded. And then, red-eyed, drunk and weary, he was suddenly sobered. The sight of one man did it. One man with a gaunt and haggard face, with his left arm in a sling. John Randolph.

The X Bar X boss came into the saloon, ordered a drink. As he lifted his glass, he saw Don Mike, and started. For a moment the two men stared at each other.

Then Randolph moved to the bar end. "Mulvaney," he said, trembling. "I must talk to you."

"About what?" half snarled Don Mike.

"About you and me," answered the haggard man. "You were right. But I swear to God I am innocent of any knowledge of it. . . ." And he told Don Mike, in a voice that trembled, just what Dell had told him of the X Bar X segundo and the man's plot to ruthlessly gain control of the Animas. "Zach Wooten—Tonk as they call him—has been working to break the Hour Glass," he finished, "so that when I foreclose it, he would have it. But I have kept the note, and I've marked it paid in full. It's the least I can do."

He handed Don Mike a paper. The Irish-Mexican stared at it curiously, his liquor-muddled brain hardly up to divining the true meaning of what he was hearing. Strangely, there was no elation in his heart. Rather a shame for his present condition, shame for the way he had treated the daughter of this man he had so unjustly mistrusted.

"Thanks," he heard himself murmuring. "That's decent of you, Randolph. I've been a blind and stubborn fool, I guess. The least I can do is to kill Wooten, looks like."

"Not necessary, my boy." The rancher shook his head. "I've been waiting here two days for Sheriff McBryde to return from El Paso. He got in on Number Ten, an hour ago. I'm on my way to see him now. We'll take a posse down there, and Dell . . ."

"Leave her here!" snapped Don Mike, with vehemence.

John Randolph's face went bleak as death. "She is not in Animas, Mulvaney. I sent her to warn you, two days ago. I told her to come to the hotel here and wait for me. She hasn't been there!"

"I sent her back to the X Bar X," confessed Don Mike, miserably. "I wouldn't take her word for things."

"I know, son," said John Randolph, gloomily. "I don't blame you. Neither will she. I am to blame for trusting Wooten. It simply means she is in his hands now. And if he's harmed her . . ." He broke off, his voice choked.

Cold sober now, Don Mike interrupted. "Let's get that sheriff," he ordered, and turned toward the door, his mind afire with a hundred bitter self-recriminations. He surged outside, stood in the revealing saloon lights waiting for John Randolph to join him.

Hoofs roared in the street. Shadowy figures clattered in a close-packed cavalcade. There came a shrill and familiar voice: "Patron! Don Miguel! By the blood of the holy martyrs, where 'ave you been, *amigo mio?*"

Tito lit running, heaved his wizened form to the boardwalk to wring the hands of his patron. He was beaming, holding in one hand a heavy sack that clinked with each step he took.

"Patron," he continued, garrulously, "I breeng you thees to shoot 'oles een the last 'alf of the mortgage. *Seguro!* Money, my bravo. Plenty *dinero!* We ride like . . ."

Don Mike waved him aside as Randolph came through the doors. "To hell with money, Tito. There is no mortgage now. It is paid. What we need now is fighting men with hair-trigger guns. Señor Randolph and me—we go now to see the sheriff and get them."

He turned away, and with the X Bar X boss strode toward the light that burned in the jailhouse.

Tito stood stock-still, staring after him. Gone was the smile on his face. His slight form seemed to shrink. His mouth drooped with a stunned sort of misery a man feels when he's been unexpectedly knocked down. But his eyes were hot gimlet points of passion. *"Caracoles!"* he swore softly. "He wants fighting men and looks elsewhere for them. *Valgame,* my roosters, I know not whether that is the Devil jest-

ing with us or *El Señor Dios* humbling our pride. What think you?"

"I think, *Diablillo,*" quoth one of his clustered relatives. "That we should ride for Mexico and quit this foolishness."

His eyes aflame, Tito turned upon him. "*Silencio,* dog!" he rasped. "Speak not that name. And speak not of leaving the Animas until I have given the word. Quick! To the horses! We ride to the X Bar X with the sheriff."

THROUGHOUT that swift ride southward, Sheriff McBryde kept staring at Tito and his men in the pale moonlight. Edging his pony over the better to study the little *mozo;* and Tito adroitly maneuvered his mount so as to prevent that very thing. Don Mike and John Randolph rode in the lead, followed by Tito and his relatives and a half dozen possemen from Animas.

Long before they reached the X Bar X, the glare of a leaping bonfire in the corrals stirred them to swifter pace. They were within a hundred yards before the men working about that fire discovered them. Men who were roping and throwing cattle. Blotting brands.

At the approach of the posse, one of the X Bar X crew sounded a shrill warning, raced for his gun on the corral fence. A gun flamed in the night and a volleying answer came from the posse. The battle for the X Bar X was under way.

Somewhere the bawling voice of Tonk Wooten bellowed orders. His men scattered out, clinging to gloomy shadows, triggering blindly at the skulking and unhorsed followers of Sheriff McBryde, with the possemen firing at the flashes.

From the moment he quit his horse to take up the gage of battle, Don Mike stalked that blatant roar that marked the changing position of Tonk Wooten. The way led him along the bars of the pole corral into the gloom of some of the smaller outbuildings as the renegade cowboys gave back.

Firing with measured calm, reloading and advancing in turn, Don Mike watched the burly foreman and two companions dart into the open door of the hay barn. Careless of his welfare, Don Mike crossed a moonlit open space with blistering gashes of rapid-fire gun explosions licking at him like hungry flames. He crossed it and paused in the deep shadows of the barn eaves. Thus he saw that slender, leaping form cascade into the moonlight and pop into the rear barn entrance.

"Tito!" he called. "Tito! Don't go in there! Wooten is holed there and—"

It was no use. Tito was already inside, and Don Mike raced to the same portal after him, steeling himself for the sounds that would herald Wooten's guns welcoming the fighting *mozo.* But all was silent. Only the grinding *crunch* of feeding horses and the slap of leather as the renegades jerked latigos tight.

He spoke guardedly: "Tito!"

No answer. Don Mike stepped into the portal. And a cold shock swept through him. A slow and deadly laugh echoed through the blackness.

"Mulvaney! Skylined like a owl on a limb. Now, you damn greaser, do some sweatin' before I kill yuh!"

Don Mike braced himself for the poignant smash of hot lead. Tonk Wooten had him trapped, and there was murder in the man's voice. His fingers gripped the butt of his gun till they ached. Waiting for one more word before staking his all on a swift shifting of the muzzle and a dicing with death. He heard the metallic click of a cocking gun, too vague a sound to aim at. Then the night was split with the orange pencil of gun flame. A choking cry, and a body jerked in the stable litter. Then Tito's voice, savage and gloating: "Thees skyline game, patron, she ees a good game to play by

two hombres. Thees *diablo* he ees for the worms now. *Quidado!* Down!"

The two renegades at the other end of the stable flung themselves a-horse, turned their guns along the corridor and roared out the front entrance. Don Mike sped them on their way with lead and then he was gripping the bony hand of Tito.

"Thanks, *amigo,*" he said simply. "I am glad you are my friend."

"A man weethout a friend, patron," sighed the little *mozo,* "ees very mooch alone. No?"

THEY walked outside. The firing had subsided to scattered shots from one of the outbuildings where McBryde had two of the renegades forted. Don Mike and Tito walked around the corrals and found their horses. Dawn was streaking the eastern hills as Tito whistled and his relatives came running. The little man seemed suddenly changed.

"*Vamanos!*" he called sharply. "It grows light, my *bravos.* We ride!"

They found horses and clustered around him. Don Mike was curious. "What's the hurry, Tito? Where are you going?"

Tito smiled. "My *relativos* and me," he chuckled, "we must go back to Mexico for a beeg fiesta. A wedding, amigo. There we weel rest up, eat and drink much, fight some and . . ."

"Wait a few days," begged Don Mike. "I will go to the bank and get money to pay you."

"Money—*pouf!*" Tito laughed scornfully. "W'at care we *por* the money, Don Miguel?" He patted that full sack on his saddle. "'Ere ees all the money we weel need. *Mucho dinero.*"

"From where?" demanded Don Mike. "Where'd you get that?"

"Eet ees like thees, patron," explained the *mozo,* happily. "My *relativos* and me, we are so very tired after loading the cattle. We buy a few bottles and go to the *bosque por* the rest. A train come up and stop. The doors of the cattle cars fly open and the cattle run out—Hour Glass cattle, *amigo,* weethout vaqueros. Poor, lost cattle! We feel sorry *por* them and drive them toward the Hour Glass. But, *ai de mi,* some *diablo* get eento those cattle and they stampede to the X Bar X. Then . . . w'at you theenk?"

"Only God knows," sighed Don Mike.

"God and Tito," corrected the *mozo.* "Señor Wooten come out weeth thees money and many thanks *por* selling heem these fine cattle. And knowing you need the money to pay the mortgage, we ride like the weend to Animas. To find there ees no mortgage. *Verdad.* So, señor, we ride to Mexico to dreenk, to eat, and to make merry. Maybe sometime, w'en I am tired of eet, I come back to be the *mozo* to you." His eyes went to the house where John Randolph stood with his daughter. "And your señora. *Adios.* We ride, my roosters!"

With a roar of hoofs, they shot across the flat, dipped into a barranca and were gone. Don Mike was still looking after them when Sheriff McBryde came running up.

"Where'd those men go?" he demanded. "To the Hour Glass?"

"To Mexico," answered Don Mike, tonelessly.

"By godfrey!" swore the peace officer. "Just my luck. I just figgered it out who that little rat and his men are. It's *Diablillo*—The Border Imp! One of the very worst *bandidos* an' Border-hoppers in the business. That gang's worth five thousand dollars on this side of the line. Dog-gone!"

Don Mike turned his head to smile. Not at the sheriff. Not at the man's discomfiture. But because he, Don Mike, had enjoyed the services of one of the most notorious bandits of northern Mex-

ico, as *mozo*. And, for the moment, he was a little blue.

Tito had been right. A man without a friend, is a man alone. He turned toward the porch where the Randolphs awaited his coming.

Dell smiled at him. "Shall I go away and leave you now, Don Mike?" she inquired. "Before you get to hating me?"

Don Mike made no answer. Through half closed eyes, he looked into her face. It was clean, fine, tender. And he realized, with a start, that he had always wanted to look at a face just like this one, wanted to have it smiling up at him—always.

Peace stole over him. A complete giving over of the bitter thing that had held him since his return. In his mind was conviction that his struggle against Dell had ended in his unconditional surrender.

A smile wiped away the scars of a frown that had threatened to become habitual. And Dell, watching that change dried her tears and smiled with the new sun, that rose to bless the Animas like a benediction.

THE END

Walt Coburn

Writes of a

"WANTED MAN'S GAMBLE"

In the Coming Issue of

Dime Western

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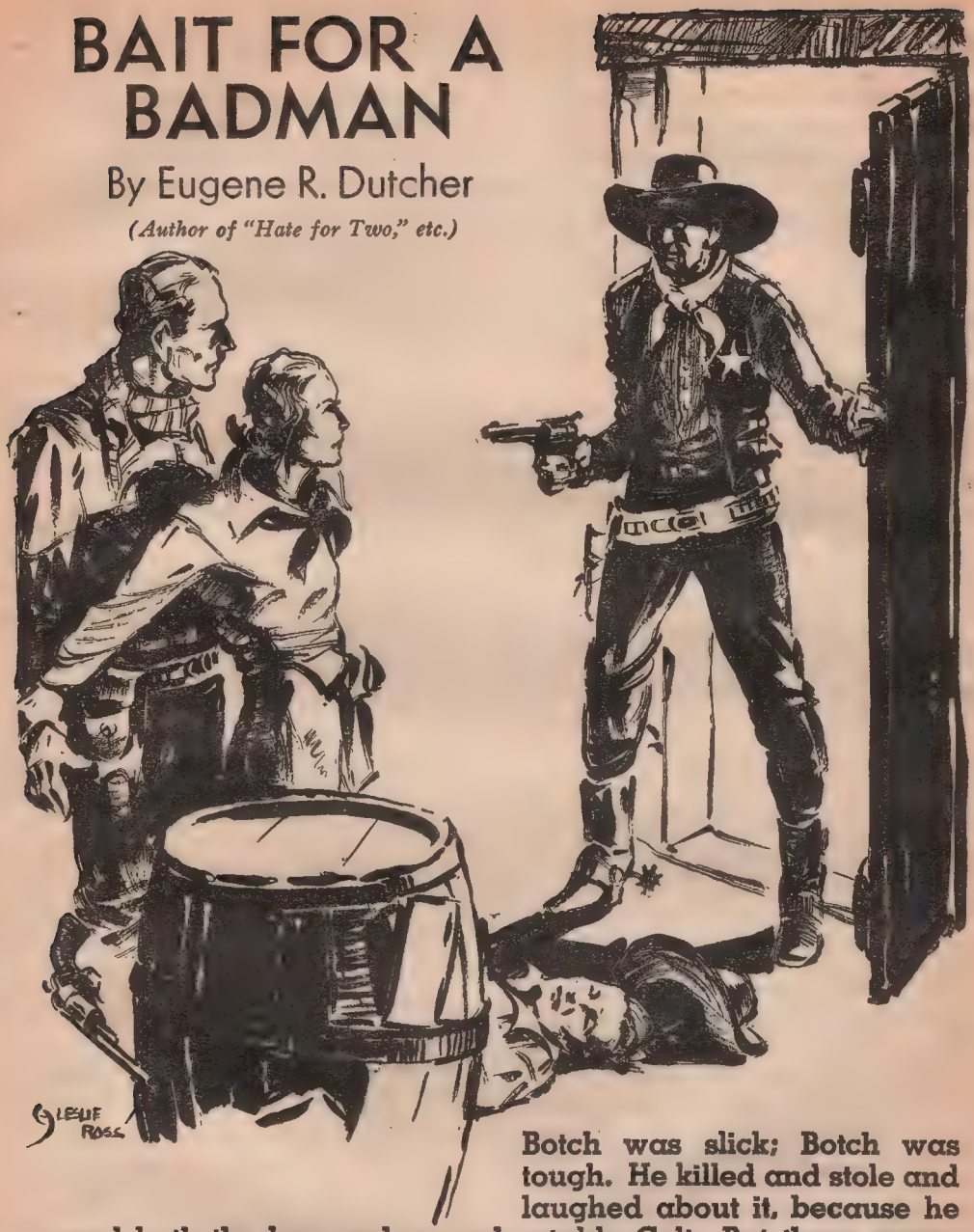
# BAIT FOR A BADMAN

By Eugene R. Dutcher

*(Author of "Hate for Two," etc.)*




**Botch was slick; Botch was tough. He killed and stole and laughed about it, because he owned both the law and an unbeatable Colt. But there comes a time when even a brow-beaten range kid will gamble his life—so that his friends may live in peace, free of the tyranny of just such rangeland bullies.**

THE horse wandered not aimlessly, but slowly and a bit awkwardly in the moonlight. The gray held one general direction, veering around mesquite and buckbrush, but always its head pointed back to those tiny, yellow, squares of light. The big gray was carrying its dead master home.

The rider lay askew in the saddle. His gunbelt, hooked over the saddlehorn, held him there. His cheek had fallen to the horse's neck. The fingers of his left hand

were twisted in the gray's mane, while the right hung down loosely, swinging rythmatically like the pendulum of a clock.

Ahead and on either side the night sounds melted away from their approach only to close in behind as they passed. Crickets silenced by the slow thudding hoofs sang again to the pale moon. "Mur-der-mur-der," seemed their high pitched chant. "Mur-der."

Now around those yellow squares of light buildings were taking form. The gray was nearing its home corral. The sound of a guitar, accompanying a lazy young voice, drifted through open windows.

Billy Wells, his chair tipped against the wall, boot heels hooked on the bottom rung, looked to the shake roof and dreamed as he sang of old Spain, of a girl and a man.

Three cowboys sat below drifting clouds of cigarette smoke; cards fell softly, and the men's voices were a drone in the background of Wells' happy thoughts.

Gee, he was lucky, having a girl like Kay and a pal like Hoot! Hoot so quiet, always smiling soft and all the time doing things for people. Why Hoot was like a brother or more maybe like a father to Kay and him.

At the table Shorty Mac, built low, wide and thick, dropped his cards. "No good," he said. "Wish Hoot would show up and make it four-handed. Say, Billy, you sure owe Hoot a heap."

"I sure do," Wells brought the chair down on four legs. There was still a hint of boyhood freckles over his nose. Only little Kay Verns thought Wells really handsome—she loved him. The rest of the folks, Kay's crippled father included, could see Wells' defects. "Why if it weren't for Hoot testifying tomorrow against Lefty Botch, me and Kay couldn't never get married," Billy Wells thought. "Gosh, Botch come awful close to wrecking everything for Kay and me. Why him and that crooked lawyer of his was all ready to take her dad's ranch, and if Hoot hadn't caught Botch killing that Mex, they'd a done it too! The sheriff says Botch'll stay in jail now till they hang him when Hoot tells the court how the Mex weren't packing a gun."

Wells hit a chord, and said aloud. "Heck sake, half them old titles was a bit cloudy."

At the table, Rusty, a big, homely, freckled, red-head nodded agreement. "I'm here to state somethin's plenty wrong when a killer like Botch and a shyster lawyer like Meek can steal legally from an old cripple like Verns and his daughter, and these here new-fangled courts help him do it. It ain't right. We got too much law. Why everybody knows Botch used to be a real one-gun badman afore he got a lawyer to do his fighting for him legal. I've seen him throw that left-hand .45 quicker'n you'd believe. He's snake fast."

"It won't do him no good now." When Shorty Mac grinned his face broadened unbelievably. "Not when Hoot stands up in court and tells what he seen Botch do in that lonely draw."

THE cards were falling again from the hands of Lon Jackson, the foreman. Shorty Mac and Rusty became intent on the game and Wells, his head bent low over the guitar, grinned and chuckled to himself. Kay was such a wonderful girl for a fellow to have all his own. She was his now, with Botch back of bars, and Hoot would keep him there. He remembered how brave Kay had been when it seemed Botch would get the ranch.

"I must take daddy back east," she had said. "I can make a living for both of us there," and her eyes were shining with tears she would not let fall. "We've had great fun building dreams, you and I,

Billy-boy. They can't take those away from us, dear, ever."

Now Wells banged out wild music, as he thought of what would happen if it weren't for Hoot testifying tomorrow. Suddenly the music changed. It was a happy sound now. Those same courts that had given Botch much land in the past five years would hang him now. Not even Meek, his attorney, who had ferreted out so many clouded titles could save Botch.

"You fellows all got to come to the wedding," Wells called, hitting a few chords of that march. "We're having it at Kay's, 'cause it hurts her dad so much to move around."

Shorty Mac and Rusty grinned. They were all mighty fond of Billy Wells. He was the kid of the outfit. They knew how he'd been saving every penny toward building a herd of his own on Verns' range. And Kay was such a plucky girl, taking care of her crippled dad. The two kids had a right to happiness. They'd waited a long while.

Only Lon Jackson the foreman found it hard to smile. He rose and dropped an arm around Wells' good strong shoulders. "I wouldn't get too het up, Billy," he said gently. "You can't never tell what might happen, you know." He turned to his bunk, hunting the makings. "I sure wish Hoot hadn't gone off alone. I asked him not to."

Wells' smile froze slowly away. The tune ran from the ends of his fingers and died.

"Hoot," he whispered, "you don't think they'd do anything to Hoot?" The guitar sent out a dismal bong as it dropped. "Why ain't we out hunting him, then?" he cried. "Come on you fools, don't set there. Let's go." He swung toward the door and stopped.

Outside hoofs sounded. "That's him," he said a little unsteadily. "That's Hoot. Gosh Lon, there weren't no call to scare a fella out his skin. Gee." Eagerly he threw open the door.

Afterwards the men couldn't recall Wells' words. It was his voice, a horrible sound that sent gooseflesh crawling over them. Even before they rushed after him they knew Hoot was out there in the moonlight, knew that he was dead.

BILLY WELLS drove the team through the early morning coolness. He wasn't young any more. The wrinkles of an old man held his face. The sun was purpling the far off mountain ranges, but a shadow still lay on the brown sand. Shorty Mac and the redhead, Rusty, rode solemnly at either wheel. Lon Jackson was in the lead. The outfit was taking Hoot to town and for the first time in many months each man wore his gun.

No one had said so but they all knew Hoot's death would release Botch from jail. It would take just about the whole outfit to down the big killer if it came to gunplay. Botch's left hand was uncanny. They all knew that Billy Wells never had practised a fast draw. Jackson had tried to talk him out of packing a gun, but when Wells refused the whole outfit started hunting in duffle bags for their own belts.

Although the sun was well up when they reached Wayoff, Wells' face seemed still to reflect the pale white of moonlight. Deep lines that had come during the night remained to be seen in daylight. Mechanically, he drew up before the sheriff's office. He sat there staring straight ahead, blindly. He did not hear the low words of Rusty and Mac as they carried Hoot out of the growing heat. Wells was thinking of Kay.

At this hour she'd be in the yard, perhaps coaxing the old red rooster to eat out of her hand. There'd be color in her cheeks, laughter in her eyes as her dad in his wheelchair on the front porch threw feed to strutting pigeons. Both would be

feeling that great joy and happiness of possession. The ranch they thought lost had miraculously been returned. It would be pretty terrible to tell those two that soon Botch's attorney would be ordering them off, and this time for good.

Clean-up men leaned on their mops before saloons watching Wells curiously. Shiny-faced storekeepers hurrying to open their establishments, paused. They started to speak to the man on the wagon seat, then changed their minds and moved hurriedly off, staring back over shoulders as if they had suddenly seen a friendly dog turn into a vicious wolf.

Wells waited a long while, but he didn't realize it, before Rusty came and stood by the wheel. "They're turning Botch loose," he said worriedly, scratching a freckle on the back of his big hand. "Botch sticks to his story that he never shot the Mex and now there ain't no proof, with Hoot gone. Meek seen the judge and the fool throwed the case out. 'Not enough evidence', says he. It's a rotten deal!"

Shorty Mac came from the office all spread out like a mad little spider ready to bite, his big nose twitching. Jackson followed him, tall and solemn, holding himself in like a good foreman should. "Let's ride," he said and swung to the saddle. He wanted to get his men out of town.

But Wells was stiffly crawling down from the seat, for again the sheriff's door was occupied. Botch stood there, adjusting his gun to his bulging left hip, chuckles rumbling in his heavy chest, and gurgling through thick lips. His left hand remained near the black butt of his holstered weapon.

Wells had stepped from the dust to the boardwalk putting himself on a level with Botch. "You killed him," he whispered. "You killed Hoot, damn you! Buckshot in the back, but you'll pay for it."

Like a vicious little dog, Meek darted out from behind his master. "That's a threat!" He showed his yellow fangs. "Young man, you'll get into serious trouble saying such things."

But Botch waved him to silence. "Billy's plumb off his nut," he grinned. "Why, even the sheriff would swear I couldn't a plugged Hoot, me being in jail." He turned to the sheriff, his manner ugly. "You'll be running old man Verns off my land. I don't care how. That girl of his can cart him off in a wheelbarrow, but run 'em out, understand? Meek'll get the papers."

Sheriff Johns had been watching Wells' eyes harden. He saw the lips tremble a little, then tighten down and he knew another minute would see a dead man on his door step and it would not be the gunman Botch—not unless the rest of the B Bar X broke out their guns, and that they seemed ready to do.

JOHNS stepped quietly between the two. "Now you listen to me," he pointed a bony finger first at Wells, then at Botch. "There's going to be no gun fights over this, and to make darn sure there ain't, I swear right now to hang the man left standing. There won't be no winners. Get that?"

Meek again darted out. "How about self-defense," he whined. "What if Botch, to protect himself, killed—"

"I'd hang Botch," cut in Johns grimly. "And that goes for the rest of you. I'll hang any man what lives through a gun fight, and that's a promise." Johns was a bad man when angered. "The folks hereabouts wanted law and order. We fought hard to get it and I ain't going to let a range war start now. Hoot was murdered and it's up to me, not nobody else, to get the killer and anybody else responsible." His faded eyes were on Botch. "I'm free to admit I don't like the way you and your lawyer are pirating land here-

abouts, but that's up to the courts, not me."

He swung on the B Bar X outfit. "Now if everything's clear, you boys better head for home."

If Johns expected hot words from Wells, he was mistaken. Solemnly, tugging at his yellow mustache, the sheriff watched them ride away.

"That ain't so good," he muttered. "No sir, that ain't so good. Billy's got some sort of idea, and I bet it ain't peaceful!"

Johns would have won his bet. It was the sheriff's own words, "I'll hang any man what lives through a gun fight," that brought Wells his crazy idea. Why shouldn't he die if it would save Kay and her father's ranch, and at the same time square things for Hoot? Of course he couldn't beat Lefty Botch's gun—no three men could do that—but he could make Botch kill him and Johns would hang Botch for it. Johns had sworn it and his word was good.

Had Wells slept on the idea he must have seen how terribly it would hurt Kay, but that buzzing that had come into his head when he lifted Hoot from the gray's back was still there.

Wells knew he must get away from his friends; they'd try to stop him. He pulled the team to a stop. "I wonder Lon," he asked, "would you loan me your bronc? Kay and her dad don't know what's happened. They're still thinking their ranch is safe. I—I ought to be the one to tell them different, don't you guess?"

Jackson took one keen look at Wells drawn face and slipped to the ground. He was a logical thinker so he didn't vaguely suspicion Wells real motive. "Sure," he said, "I reckon you're right."

While Wells climbed like an old man from the wagon, Shorty Mac rolled a smoke, spilled much tobacco and ended by hurling it away.

Rusty busied himself by wiping the sweat band of his Stetson. They all wanted to say something that might help the kid carry on. Rusty tried. "I sure hope this ain't going to make no difference in yours and Kay's plans."

Wells' back was to them as his boot found the stirrup, but they saw his shoulders tremble and they heard what might have been a sob—or was it the dry rasp of overalls against saddle leather?

As he rode away Mac turned angrily on Rusty. "You darn fool," he growled, "this'll split those kids wide apart and you knowed it. What'd you say that for anyhow?"

Rusty's big chin shot forward. "Somebody had to say something," he snapped. "We couldn't let him go off alone without knowing we was all feeling for him."

Jackson's raised voice drowned them out. "Oh, Billy," he called, "you'll get back to the ranch by noon?"

Wells turned and lifted a hand. "So long," his voice drifted softly to them over the heat shimmering sand. The three stared at one another.

"So long," Shortly Mac muttered. "Now why did he say that?"

Rusty shifted uncomfortably in the saddle. "Ain't you ever answered a question by shouting 'so-long'?" he asked. "I have. It's just like saying O.K. I heard you."

As Jackson climbed aboard the wagon, his eyes were puzzled. "Maybeso," he said and kicked the brake loose. "Yeah; that must of been it."

WELLS found the dog-trot unbearable and he put his mount into a long swinging lope. The faster he reached Kay and told her what had happened, the faster he could be on his way to Botch's. But when he topped a ridge and saw the Verns' little ranch with its garden patch out back the barn and fields of green alfalfa all around, Wells wondered how

he could tell the man and girl his news. He dropped down the big, oak-covered hills and rode an irrigation ditch bank into the yard.

He saw Kay standing beside her father's wheelchair on the shaded porch. A tiny, white handkerchief was waving to him. Then Kay came running, laughing happily, yellow hair tumbling all about her shoulders. Always she greeted him this way, not waiting for his arrival, but coming to him. Always Wells scooped her up in front of his saddle, but today was different.

Kay's happy rush faltered at sight of her man's face, so haggard, and his eyes seemed to be burning through her. Wells dismounted heavily. Their hands met in silence. His so cold, quickly drained the warmth from her own.

"What is it?" she whispered. "What's happened to you?"

"It's Hoot," Wells managed thickly. "He—he's dead. Murdered!"

"Oh, no!" Their entwined fingers were very white from squeezing so tightly. Kay realized slowly what his words meant, and her eyes asked a silent question.

Wells nodded. "Yes, Botch has been turned loose—lack of evidence. But don't worry too much, yet, honey." He tucked her hand under his arm and slowly led her toward the porch. "It'd be pretty terrible if we let Hoot die for us without a little good coming of it."

The old man, watching their approach, saw how pitifully his daughter's shoulders drooped under the calico dress. How lifeless their steps. Then he saw something else. Two riders loping along the dusty road toward his ranch, and he knew what had affected his girl and Wells so strongly.

"So they turned him loose," Verns said pointing, "and he's come to take my home after all. I knew he'd get out somehow."

Wells turned and saw Botch riding through the gate. Meek followed him closely.

"Howdy folks, howdy," Botch rolled his two hundred pounds out of the saddle. "Just thought you'd all like to know I'm loose again, but I see Billy beat me to it." Suddenly he lost his good humor, big lips pouted. "You can start packing, Verns," he growled, " 'cause I'm moving you out come a day or two."

That buzzing in Wells' head was making him a bit dizzy. He saw how high Kay held her head, how hard she fought to keep her chin from trembling. How her father's shrunken hand patted hers where it lay on his wasted shoulder. They made a pitiful heart-tearing sight; a picture that Billy Wells could not stand.

Verns' hand was held tight over his heart. "My medicine," he whispered, "you'd better get my medicine." Kay, with sudden fear for her father, ran into the house.

As the screen door closed her away Wells spread his feet. He was glad she would not see what happened.

"Botch," he hissed, "let's see your gun."

The challenge came suddenly. Botch stared. He did not grasp the words, but Wells' posture was enough. His big knees bent, his burly left shoulder swung a bit forward, bringing the deadly left hand down close to gun-butt. The actions were instinctive. His slow brain had forgotten the sheriff's warning.

BUT Meek, paid to think and think fast, had been watching, little eyes narrowed. Swifty his hand shot out. It darted under the spread fingers of Botch's left hand and jerked the gun from its holster.

"The fool's trying to make you kill him," he squealed, "so Johns will hang you. He's crazy mad!"

And Wells, his body braced to receive lead, his gun half drawn, let it drop back.

He couldn't fire into an unarmed man. Hoot wouldn't want him to get revenge that way.

"Can you beat that," Botch boomed. "He was doing it to cheat me out of the old man's place here, I reckon, huh Meek?"

"Yes, and maybe he even thinks you had something to do with his friend's death." The lawyer's lips grew to a grin. "Funny ideas these cowboys get. Shall we ride?"

"Yeah." Botch mounted and looked down on Wells. "You better quit wearing a gun, sonny, till you grow up." His grin faded. "And don't you forget, Verns," he wagged a thick finger, "clear out of here right quick!"

But the old man who was watching Wells so intently hardly heard. Nor did Kay, standing in the doorway, a bottle forgotten in her hands. Not till Botch and Meek had cleared the yard did she move and then it was with a rush as full realization of what had nearly happened came to her.

"Oh, Billy," still holding the little bottle she gripped his arms and pulled him to her so her head was on his chest, and his chin rested in her hair. "You wouldn't, you couldn't of done it?" she sobbed. "Don't you see how wrong it was? Don't you know you would have hurt me worse than anything else possibly can hurt?"

Her tears stopped, she led him to the porch and sat down on the top step. Wells, his hands locked about his drawn up knees, stared moodily at the red geraniums.

"Don't you see," Kay whispered. "You had no chance with that beast. You wouldn't think of shooting yourself. It was the same. Oh, I can't explain!"

Verns had wheeled himself close. "Perhaps I can," he said quietly. Both had forgotten their own trouble. "Billy-boy, you're all mixed up. Too much bad news hit you to once. Look at me, a cripple with a bad heart." He had taken the medicine from Kay. "I take this stuff to live. That's my fight. A real man must die fighting to live. He must not die because he wants to. That's cowardly. Now if Botch was a normal man in his draw, or if you could anywhere's near equal his speed, I'd be the first to say, 'Go get him, Billy.' Not because it'd save my ranch or because you and Kay could maybe get married someday, but because Hoot was a mighty fine friend and you and me know Botch had him murdered."

The gentle, quiet voice somehow swept Wells' brain clean of its snarled thoughts. If only he and Botch were equal! Of course that was it. Well, they were equal. Any fool could see that. How darn simple.

Wells found Kay's hand. He hid his excitement well. "And that's how you feel about it, honey?" he asked. "I should go for Botch if I was his match?"

"Yes Billy."

"And if I got him," Wells went on, "I'd be outlawed. Johns meant it when he said he'd hang the man left standing. Still you'd want I should get him if I could?"

"Yes Billy, still. You'd owe it to Hoot. But that can never, never be," she smiled, so sure. "No one can ever be half so fast as Botch, so let's don't even think about it any more." She squeezed his hand and with unwarranted joy danced around behind her father's wheelchair. "Things aren't so bad. Dad and I'll make out fine, back East! Why, it'll be fun seeing all the big buildings again, the lights and the crowds. And some day, Billy, perhaps I'll come back to you."

Verns' chuckle cracked badly. "She means when I kick the bucket." He reached an arm back and found his daughter's shoulder. "But that'll be a long, long while, young lady. I'm having too much fun, just sitting around. Think of all the poor devils that have to work for a living." He laughed, but with closed eyes, so as

not to see the yard with its old red hen scratching for her brood, and the pigeons sailing over the watering trough. He loved it all so. "I'm sure going to have a swell time in the city, Billy. A fellow gets sort of tired of this quiet life. Maybe I'll find me a rich widdy."

Kay pinched his ears. "You talk that way and I'll get jealous," she threatened. "I won't have any other woman purring around my old tomcat." Her laughter sounded happy enough, but her eyes held tears.

WELLS stood before them, a grin frozen into his lean young face. They were like a couple of little, frightened kids in a very dark woods, singing to keep up their courage. Botch would ride straight to his home ranch. At this time of day there would only be Meek and the cook around. That was good.

Wells found his facial muscles stiff. "I reckon I'd best be heading for home," he lied. "Lon'll be firing me."

Kay came to him. "You'll come over tonight," she asked, "and—and help us pack?" She wanted him near her these last few nights.

"Sure thing," Wells said, knowing by night he'd either be with Hoot or riding it out with a posse. He wanted desperately to take her close to him, but she was trying so hard to be brave. Tenderness would break her up.

"So long," he smiled and trembling lips warned him not even to squeeze her cold fingers. He rode off along the ditch bank, looking back once to see Verns beckoning Kay to him.

Verns was solemn, thoughtful. "That boy's got something on his mind, Kay," he said. "After a while you'd best ride over and tell Lon Jackson what happened here. Lon's got a steady head, he'll close-herd Billy for a spell."

Out of sight of Verns' ranch, Wells swung west, straight for Botch's. He rode to save his mount now, for later he might need all the horse could give him. His plan took no particular thought; it was so simple. All he needed was the opportunity to put it into effect.

He topped a knoll and ran smack into the one man he did not want to meet.

Sheriff Johns rode up slowly, his left eye wide with suspicion, his right near closed. "Where you heading?" he wanted to know.

"Over to join the boys," Wells lied hooking a leg casually around the saddle horn. "They're west of here hazin' our stuff back this way. You see, Sheriff, we all decided to let you handle this mess and if we don't have to chase our stuff too far west we won't meet none a Botch's men." He grinned. "I was sure a fool thinking to shoot it out with Botch." Wells tried to look foolish and apparently he succeeded, for Johns' flat chest filled with relief.

"I got news for you, Billy," he said. "A cowboy come into town and says he found a dead man up in the gap just about where you figure Hoot was shot. I reckon Hoot got his own murderer afore he passed out. The puncher didn't recognize the dead gent and I'm going up to look him over now. It won't do no good, though. If Botch hired the killer, that lawyer will make darn sure I can't prove it. Court law ain't so good as the kind I used to deal out, it seems to me. Well, I got to be moving."

Wells and the sheriff rode apart at right angles. It was nearly an hour later when Johns, riding slowly, suddenly remembered something startling. Wells had said the whole outfit was out on the west range, but the puncher who found the dead man had stopped by the B Bar X spread. "The whole outfit was sitting around like as if they had hot horseshoes in their pants," the puncher had said. "They was shooting

at cans and posts as if their .45's needed exercise right bad."

Johns dragged his mount to a stop. "Dang him," he growled, "Wells is going for Botch on his own. The fool!" He put his startled horse down a shale slide. He went over obstacles instead of around them. Johns rode to reach Botch's fast.

Wells lay patiently in the willows close by Botch's barn and watched the long, low adobe ranch house. Botch, always unmindful of his horse, had neglected to unsaddle when he returned from town. Eventually the killer would come from the house where the cook could be heard rattling pans. Botch would turn the horse into the corral and then carry the gear into the barn, and that was where Wells meant to meet him. He wriggled sideways, putting the barn between him and the house and went forward in a low, swift run.

The barn's rear door was ajar. He slipped through it as Botch's voice came from the house. A screen banged. Boots stomped across porch boards, then became muffled in the dust of the yard. Wells glided forward. Flat against the front wall and very close to the wide, open door he waited, gun out. Apparently Botch was in a good humor. He cursed and chuckled as the horse snorted its fear of him. A loud crack as leather bit at flesh, wild stomping as the horse ran free in the corral. A burst of ugly laughter, and Botch was coming toward the barn.

Wells back hugged the wall, his gun was held high. Boots crunched close, a stirrup swung into view—a big foot. Loaded down with gear as he was, Botch still somehow managed to drop the saddle and slap that deadly left hand onto gun-butt before Wells struck. The long gun-barrel found Botch's skull through the thick Stetson. He went forward two weaving steps, grunting piggishly and fell.

WELLS followed him like a cougar to the kill. Swiftly he removed the gunbelt from around Botch's heavy hips. And with some difficulty replaced it with his own, shoving the killer's own gun into the leather. Already Botch was stirring, for Wells had purposely struck lightly. Wells slipped deeper into the barn. While he watched his victim slowly regain consciousness he adjusted Botch's left handed holster to his own hip, dropped the .45 into it and silently waited.

Outside birds sang, a rooster crowed. The sweet smell of good hay came down from the loft. Soon the arid smell of burnt powder would spoil it. Roaring guns would scare away the birds and when they timidly returned one of them here in the barn now would be dead and the other wanted for murder.

Botch sat up, his broad back to Wells. The way he shook his shaggy head and growled were the actions of an angered bear. He stood up muttering to himself. Wells waited, giving his man full time to collect his senses. It seemed hours Botch stood there before he started for the door. Wells' hiss carried the startling effect of a rattler's warning buzz.

"I'm behind you!" he whispered. "Here behind you."

Botch twisted. He went sideways, the instinctive move of the killer. His left hand was unfollowable, but the sound when it hit bare overalls came plainly.

"It's on your right hip," Wells said softly. "I'm wearing your left-handed outfit. Sort of an awkward feeling ain't it?"

Botch was still in his crouch. "What's the idea," he growled. "What you aim to do?"

"Can't you guess, Botch? Hoot was a friend of mine. Kay's more than a friend. Sure you can figure out the answer."

"But look a-here," Botch argued. "I ain't no good with my right. I can't—"

"You can," Wells cut in sharply. "You're as good with your right as I am with my left. We're even." Over Botch's shoulder he could look through the door and see the long, green, narrow valley. Hard up it came a rider. The sun reflected brightly from something on his chest. Sheriff Johns was riding at a horse-killing pace.

"You can," Wells repeated, "and you will—now." He had to force gun-play fast.

"No!" Botch seemed to straighten; he seemed to relax, unwilling to fight. Suddenly then his boot buried in straw kicked out. A golden shower covered Wells. Fine particles filled his eyes.

Both men were at their guns, their fingers seemed to grow big as thumbs as unaccustomed hands struck walnut. It was a nightmare where one tries to close a door against an enemy and the latch falls to bits, the hinges break away. Wells could hardly see, but his feet were firm on the ground and he was drawing steadily. Botch was still off balance from the kick that had put him well in the lead. His .45 was clear of the leather . . .

It roared once into the ground as his unaccustomed thumb slipped from the hammer. Too much haste. Fear had him now. He'd never met a man before on equal terms. It made him miss his second chance. There was no third chance. Wells killed him.

As the gun-thunder died Wells heard Johns' horse slide to a stop before the barn. He whirled to escape through the rear door. There in the door stood Jackson and the boys. Kay was running toward him, a white little ghost. From behind Wells came the grim command.

"Don't move!" Johns stood behind a steady gun. The sheriff took one look at the dead man and his wrinkled leathery face set to stern lines. "So," he said hard and cold, "after all my warning you gone and done it. It means the rope, Wells!"

Jackson stepped forward. "You're jumping the fence, sheriff," he drawled, "because—*I* killed Botch!"

There was a moment of stunned silence before Wells pushed forward, angry eyed. "No you don't, Lou," he snapped. "You ain't—"

He got no further. Both Shorty Mac and Rusty had taken their cue from Jackson and were vehemently stating that they individually had killed Botch. They held out guns recently fired at the ranch as proof.

Jackson smiled just a little. "Looks so you'd have to hang the whole outfit to get the right man, Sheriff."

Johns said nothing, but his left eye was tight shut while the right, very wide, studied Wells' left hip, then roamed away to the dead man's right hip. Botch never wore a gun on that hip. Shrewdly he guessed what had happened.

Meek had slipped into the barn with the silence of a weasel. Thoughtfully the lawyer studied the situation, black little eyes seeing everything the sheriff saw, and a bit more. There was a perfect case against Wells. The cowboy had made threats. The courts would hang him.

Johns read these thoughts in the lawyer's cruel little eyes. He saw how badly Kay trembled in Wells' arms and how high the boy held his chin, ready to take his medicine. It was a tough break for the kids, but they'd have to take it. He had his own wife and kids to think of with election coming up. Meek would force him to make an arrest. The new-fangled courts would do the rest.

"Well Meek," he growled savagely, eager to get it over with. "What you think?"

"Think," Meek shrilled. "Why, man, it's plain as day!" His bony finger was swinging toward Botch's gunbelt hanging around Wells' lean hips. A sudden thought

stopped the move. Meeks' face became a mask, his thin shoulders shrugged. "The man that paid me to think is dead," he said. "Under those conditions I don't think well at all. Use your own judgment, Sheriff. I'm leaving on the first stage out." He glided away and Johns, glaring altogether too fiercely, swung on Jackson.

"Looks so I'm licked," he growled. "But if I had one little piece of proof I'd hang somebody, sure. One of you done it, but I can't prove nothing, darn it!" Then under his breath he muttered close to Jackson's ear. "I'm going outside for a spell. You better get that darn gunbelt off Billy and back on Botch afore the coroner shows up. He's great on law. Me, I go in more for peace and justice."

THE Happy Three Ranch, that's what they call the Verns' spread now. A contented old man peacefully watches the red hen and her new brood of chicks. Kay is standing beside him, a smudge of flour on her cheek. Already, Wells, riding in along the ditch-bank is sniffing the air. Apple pie, he guesses. Then Kay is running to him and this time Wells scoops her up before his saddle. Now he has flour on his cheek, too. And Verns, watching them ride close, knows just how that old red hen feels about her brood.

Oh, yes, there is a rumor afloat that soon they are changing the spread's name to the Happy Four Ranch. Billy's buying the cigars.

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# The Whistler Makes War

By E. B. Mann

*(Author of "The Whistler's Gallows Trap," etc.)*

**To most trail-bosses it would have seemed the grim luck of the cattle-drive—that wild night the herd stampeded and the broken, shapeless body of young Johnny Anders was picked up from the path of a thousand fear-maddened hoofs. But to Jim Sinclair—alias "The Whistler"—it was cold-blooded murder!**

JOHNNY ANDERS reached out and deftly captured the hand that set a plate of pie before him. "Hi, Beautiful," he said.

"Hi, Johnny." Mary Travis smiled down at him. "How's the invalid?"

"Invalid!" Johnny grumbled. "Honey, I'm no invalid. I just got a bullet through

GRIPPING COW-COUNTRY NOVELETTE

one leg. You think that'd kept me here all this time? Me, I come from a country where they'd turn *this* town back to the prairie-dogs. Little ol' bullet ain't keepin' me in no such town as this unless there's a reason, see? . . . Look, Mary. How's for comin' home with me? My outfit'll be back through here soon now and we could just get hitched and travel south with 'em. Please, Mary?"

Blue eyes twinkled as the girl pulled free of him. "Eat your pie, Johnny," she said gently. "You're a nice boy, but—"

She paused, aware that Johnny was not listening. The boy's mouth, open to admit a bite of pie, stayed so as Johnny stared wide eyed toward the door. She turned. A tall ungainly horse, dust-caked, stood at the hitching rail outside and a man beside him bent double as he came

under the rail toward the restaurant. He straightened slowly, slapping the dust out of his clothes.

"Sinclair!"

Johnny's high, excited shout rang through the room and Mary glanced at him. He stood up suddenly, brushed past her as he ran toward the door. The screen slammed and Mary watched the two men meet. They came in together finally, Johnny dragging at the stranger's arm.

"Jim, this is Mary. Mary Travis. Ain't she somethin', though? Jim Sinclair, Mary. Take a look at him! He's one o' the neighbors I'm offerin' you. Jim, you wait until you taste her pie!"

They shook hands awkwardly, somewhat embarrassed by the boy's effusiveness. But Sinclair's smile won Mary's interest. His voice was pleasant too, she thought; low, clear and resonant.

He was a tall, spare man, broad-shouldered and powerful. Yet there was something feline in the way he moved. His face was lean and angular, not quite handsome, but likeable. It was an ageless face, mature and yet not deeply marked by years. His hands attracted her as he swept off his hat; lean sun-bronzed hands, long fingered, strong. Her eyes followed them down to the guns that hung, tied low from crossing cartridge belts, against his hips. Those guns chilled something deep inside of her. She heard him say, "I'll take whatever's handy on the bill of fare," and turned away.

For Mary Travis knew the signs. Her father had worn guns like those; black-handled guns, swung low to match the sweep of easy-swinging hands. Travis had been a small man, unlike Sinclair, but his hands had been like Sinclair's and his eyes had had that same veiled, speculative look. He, too, had been a fighting man.

He had died with those guns smoking in his hands and since that night his daughter had been mistress of the Star Cafe. Trail drivers worshipped her, tried to make love to her, ate her pies. She knew the breed: good men, bad men, blustering men, silent men; a few like Johnny Anders; but only once in a great while a man like Jim Sinclair.

HIS voice came back to her as she prepared his food: "I've got a trail herd south a piece. Met a man at the Osage fork and he told me to swing west; said trail drivers wasn't welcome here in Butte. I've rode in to have a look. What's wrong?"

"Ever hear of Ed Brandt?" Johnny Anders' voice was curt.

"Who hasn't? Town marshal here, ain't he? Gun-fightin' hombre too, I've heard."

"I'll say he is!"

Their voices dropped into a steady drone with only a word here and there that came intelligibly to Mary's ear. But she could guess the gist of it. Johnny Anders had arrived two weeks ago, one of the Pothook S outfit. They too had met a man at the Osage fork who had warned them out of Butte; but they had ridden in, incredulous and truculent. And Ed Brandt had given them until sundown to get out of town!

She remembered their bewilderment. This was a trail-town, a cattle market. They had beef for sale. Yet they were ordered on. It seemed incredible to them.

But they had had no man who could contest the deadly speed of Ed Brandt's gun. They were cattlemen, not gun-fighters, and so they went—in a flurry of defiant shouts and shots, and they left a man behind them. Johnny Anders. Mary had seen him fall, his brown horse somersaulting in the yellow dust. The Pothook S had wheeled and circled back for him, grim-faced now that their derisive fun had turned to seriousness. Marshal Ed

Brandt had faced them there before the Star Cafe; Brandt and his deputies.

It might have ended in a bloody fight except that Mary ran out to the wounded man. Her coming broke the deadlock and made way for talk. Sheriff H. P. Allison had supplied the talk; calm, reasoning talk in which he pointed out that no man knew whose lead had caused the casualty. He was a gaunt, hawk-faced, slow-spoken man, this Allison, but he was old. Once powerful, he was hag-ridden now by forces he could not control; by drink, and by Ed Brandt.

But he had won his point that day and stopped the bloody harvest of the guns. Johnny Anders had remained in Butte to heal his wound. The Pothook S had driven on toward Osage.

Johnny was telling Sinclair that now while they waited for his meal. Sinclair was frowning when Mary set the smoking plate between his hands.

"But *why*, Johnny? This town is nothin' but a mushroom, feedin' off the cattle trail! The herds are its life-blood. Why bar 'em?"

Mary was gone before the answer came. But she knew what it would be. Ed Brandt was more than just a fighting man: he was grasping, avaricious. And he was king of Butte.

She looked up and smiled a greeting as Sheriff H. P. Allison came through the front screen door. It was past sunset now and the Star Cafe would soon be full of men. It was the hour of the day when Sheriff Allison was at his best. It was his code that gentlemen took no strong drink before the sundown and so, by day, he was a dour man tormented by a raging thirst. But now he had assuaged that thirst without yet passing the frontier of drunkenness. He spoke to her affectionately.

"Good evenin' child. You're lookin' well, as usual."

"I'm fine, H. P. What will you have?"

Three men lurched through the door as he replied and Allison's quick frown sent Mary's glance that way. They were Ed Brandt and Lanky Tolliver, dealer in Brandt's gambling house, and Sailor Blaine. Blaine was an ape-like hairy man, a bouncer in one of Brandt's saloons. And he was drunk.

They took a table next to Anders and Sinclair. They sat down noisily and Mary saw Sinclair glance up at them. Blaine seized a knife and pounded on the table.

"You'd best wait on them, Mary." Allison's voice was low, filled with disgust. "Never mind me. Get 'em fed and out o' here. I'll wait."

She nodded and walked down the aisle. Johnny Anders looked up at her as she passed and she gave him a reassuring smile. But her voice was cold when she spoke to Brandt.

"What will it be?"

Blaine laughed and reached for her. "Well, if it ain't li'l spitfire! Ain't she purty, Ed?" His fingers found her wrist, clamped down on it. "C'mere to me, sweetheart! Gimme a kiss!"

Her left hand cracked against his cheek and the shock of the blow ran stingingly along her arm. Blaine laughed at her, his fingers tightening. He stood up awkwardly and drew her close to him.

A CHAIR crashed back against the wall as Anders sprang. His right fist flashed past Mary's face to Blaine's. She heard the sodden impact of the blow, saw Blaine's lips spurt blood. The big man's head jerked back. The table tilted as his weight came back upon the edge of it. A cruet broke and vinegar sloshed into Ed Brandt's lap. But Mary's arm was free. She stepped back hastily as Johnny struck again. She caught a glimpse of the boy's face, congested and grim. It startled her.

Blaine dropped his head and swung a ponderous, flailing blow. It caught Johnny full in the chest and flung him back. Just back of Blaine, Larky Tolliver half rose and dropped his hands below the table top. His eyes were murderous.

Then suddenly Mary glimpsed Sinclair. She had not seen him rise, but he was standing now, a little stooped, knees slightly bent. His hand blurred forward in a short swift arc. She heard the slapping impact of his fingers on the butts of his guns; saw the weapons leap and swing.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Tolliver's gun clear the top of the table. Two shots ripped out in one quick, stuttering report. A bullet struck within a foot of Johnny Anders' hip. At ten-foot range, that shot could not have missed if Sinclair's lead had not smashed Tolliver's gun-arm aside. Mary saw the look of blank astonishment on Tolliver's face. His gun clattered upon the table top.

Sinclair's voice cracked out: "I've got you covered, Brandt. Don't draw."

The silence held through five or six heartbeats. Ed Brandt's right hand stopped its downward sweep and hung, a rigid claw, above his gun. In the back of the room a chair scraped harshly as Sheriff Allison stood up. Sinclair's eyes were blank, expressionless.

"You fool!" Brandt's voice lashed out, sharp edged and passionate. "Put up them guns! I'm marshal here. You're under arrest!"

"For what?"

"You've killed a man! For *nothin'!* Nothin' but a bit of fun!"

"It didn't look like fun to me. That jasper drew his gun. Where I come from, that's serious. And besides, the man ain't dead. His shoulder's smashed, that's all."

Again a silence while Brandt met Sinclair's unswerving stare. Allison's voice, clipped and powerful, broke the deadlock. "He's right, Brandt. Lay off him!"

Brandt scowled, but Mary saw his arm relax. His hand moved up away from his holstered gun. Sinclair stood for a moment motionless, then sheathed his guns.

"You're H. P. Allison," he said. "I've heard of you. . . . I'm Jim Sinclair."

SOMETHING in the name caught Allison's interest. He repeated it a little breathlessly. "Sinclair, eh? What brings you here?" There was an undercurrent of excitement in his voice but Sinclair seemed not to notice that. No more did Brandt.

Sinclair aimed his answer more at Brandt than at Allison. "I've got a trail herd south of here and I promised certain buyers that I'd meet them here in Butte. They're due the day after tomorrow. I'd have shoved the herd on in this evenin', only I met a man at the Osage fork who told me Butte was quarantined against trail beef. I rode in to have a look."

Brandt's sneering voice answered him. "Lookin' for trouble, eh?"

"No! Not lookin' for it, nor dodgin' it either, Brandt. That goes for me and for my men."

Brandt dropped both hands upon the table top and leaned his weight on them, his jaw thrust out. "You called my name awhile ago," he said softly. "So you've heard of me, eh?"

Sinclair nodded. "Yes, I've heard of you. Your name came down the trail to meet me. Brandt, cowboy-killer. Brandt, badman of Butte."

"Keep out of Butte, Sinclair!" Brandt's voice cracked out with sudden violence. "That goes for you and for your men and for your cows! This town ain't healthy for the likes of you! That plain?"

"It's plain," Sinclair said levelly. "But

we're comin' in! And get this straight: You say Butte ain't healthy for us. Well, any disease we come down with here in Butte is apt to be catchin', Brandt. *Sabe?* Smallpox or lead-poisonin', it's all the same. We give and take!"

Brandt straightened jerkily and turned, his face dark with rage. Blaine stood beside him, partly sobered, but still dazed by the shifting tide of events. Brandt snapped at him. "Help, Tolliver! We're gettin' out o' here."

They took the wounded man between them and half led, half carried him outside. The slam of the door left a welcome silence in the room. Sinclair sat down and stirred the coffee in his cup. Mary Travis caught her breath with a little gasp that was like a sob.

"Oh, Johnny, you shouldn't have done it! I can take care of myself, really I can. It was sweet of you, and I'm grateful, but they might've killed you!"

She turned to Sinclair then and he looked up at her and smiled. That smile silenced any words she might have said to him, but he got his thanks from her eyes. Afterward, she was to remember that it was not until he smiled that she had realized that he was young. . . .

The place was filling rapidly. Curious faces lined the windows facing the street and the slam of the street door was incessant as men filed in and shot furtive glances at Sinclair before they took their seats. Sinclair laid a bill on the table and stood up. Johnny Anders was beside him when he reached the door.

"What do you aim to do?"

But Sinclair left the question unanswered. He said, "Get you a horse, Johnny. If you stay in Butte until your outfit comes back for you, it'll be in boothill. Right now you're ridin' for me. The Pothook S can have you back when we get home."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Stampede!

OUTSIDE the shallow dome of light that encased the town they rode into a night of stormy darkness. Questions seethed in Johnny's brain, but he refused to utter them. Sinclair would talk when he was ready, and Johnny knew that he must be content to wait.

But the answer surprised him when it came. Sinclair said slowly: "That Travis girl . . . She's got no business in a place like that. Most men would take one look at her and respect her. But there's always a few like Blaine."

Johnny grinned. "I been tryin' to persuade her she ought to go home with me," he said. "I've had no luck. She wants to teach the local school. From what I hear, she'd have got the job long ago, only Brandt runs the local politics and Brandt's got his eye on her for a different job."

"Such as?"

"His wife! . . . That low-down skunk!" The final words came out explosively and Johnny flushed. "Maybe I'm prejudiced," he admitted. But Sinclair shook his head.

"I reckon not." He paused and, when he spoke again, there was a passion in his voice that was somehow startling. "From what I hear of Brandt, he's a disgrace to the badge he wears. There was a time when it took hard men to rule the trail towns; men like Wyatt Earp and Masterson and Breakinridge. Maybe that time ain't past. But Brandt's a four-flusher, tryin' to build up a name as a gun-fightin' lawman by killin' skylarkin' kids because they get a little noisy after eatin' trail dust. The men he's killed ain't been badmen at all."

A shaft of forked lightning split the night, and Johnny Anders shot a sidelong glance at Jim Sinclair. Sinclair's face was grim.

"I wish I'd driven straight ahead this

afternoon," Jim said explosively. "There's trouble comin' yonder. I wish I had the cattle in the pens."

The silence between the rumblings of the storm was breathless. Anders was counting the seconds between flash and thunder, and he knew that the storm was nearing them. He said, "Your cattle boogery?"

Sinclair said, "No. They bed down quietly. But hell, a herd won't stand with lightnin' crackin' in their ears too close. We've had an easy drive so far; too easy. I should have crowded my luck while it lasted."

His voice faded into the louder rumbling of the storm. It took no counting now to know that the storm was near. Johnny Anders pricked his ears to catch a shrill, high sound that pierced the echoes from the clouds. It puzzled him at first, but then he knew. The sound gained volume, soaring up and up in birdlike melody; broke breathlessly and ran in liquid trills so keen and high that Johnny held his breath for fear of missing it. Sinclair was whistling.

"So this is why they call him the Whistler!" he thought. He had heard whistling that had seemed expert to him before, but nothing like this. The flutelike sound was different now, more rhythmical, with a quick lilting cadence that set Johnny's nerves to tingling.

"I'd hate to be a man he was huntin' and hear that whistlin' comin' toward me in the night!" The thought flashed into Johnny's mind.

And that was odd, because Sinclair was thinking bitterly, "I'll have to shoot it out with Brandt! Why do I always butt my head into a need for death? But I can't back down. My herd goes into Butte and, when it does, I'll have to meet Ed Brandt in smoke. That's in the cards."

A CAMPFIRE gleamed ahead of them and Sinclair swerved toward it. A squat, broad-shouldered man came out to the rim of the firelight to meet them and Johnny recognized Matt Timbro, boss of Sinclair's central ranch. He made a burly figure against the fire, his feet spread wide and planted solidly, blocking their advance.

Sinclair said levelly, "It's all right, Matt. How's everything?"

Timbro's voice rolled back to them, relieved and cordial. "Cozy, Jim, but threatenin'. I got all the boys out with the herd. Me, I was waitin' for you. . . . Doggone this storm."

Sinclair grunted as he swung down. A swarthy boy came forward and took their mounts and Sinclair called after him. "Leave 'em saddled, Pancho. Where's the cavvy?"

"Night horses picketed just beyond the wagon, señor. The others, I have hold them in the bend of the creek."

"Bueno! Hang on to 'em. We may need remounts before the night is done."

Timbro shot a glance at him. "Lookin' for trouble, Jim?"

Sinclair's short bark of laughter jerked at Johnny's nerves. "You're the second man that's asked me that this evenin', Matt! No, not lookin' for it; just gettin' set in case it comes."

Timbro shrugged. He glanced at Johnny as he turned away. "Hi, kid," he said. "You aim to ride for a good outfit for a change?"

Johnny grinned, but he turned instantly to follow Sinclair. "You want me to go out—?"

Sinclair shook his head. "There's enough men out there already, I reckon," he said. "Enough to hold 'em if they want to be held, anyway. And there ain't enough men in the world to stop 'em if they want to start!"

He stood with his back to the fire star-

ing out toward the lightning-streaked mass that veiled the west. Johnny sat down silently and braced his back against the wagon-wheel. Matt Timbro's voice reached into the wagon and Johnny heard a vague stirring and a flow of sleepy profanity answer it. A fat man crawled out past the canvas wagontop and peered speculatively at the sky before he sat down upon the wagon tongue to pull on his boots.

Sinclair shrugged jerkily and left the fire, prowling the rim of the firelight with quick uneasy strides. There was quiet here, unbroken except for the rumble of the approaching storm, and yet there was a vague unrest. Johnny felt it and Sinclair, staring beyond the wagon toward the picketed night horses, felt it, too. The wind died suddenly, leaving an electric hush. And through that hush Sinclair's keen ears picked up the beat of horses' hoofs.

He stood motionless, awaiting the arrival of riders coming in from the herd. But none came and the sound died out. Then the storm broke and lightning cracked like a gigantic whip across the wagonbows. Thunder followed in an all-engulfing roar and a wall of wind slapped Sinclair's face with staggering violence. He leaned against it, aware somehow of sounds behind the thunder's heavy cannonade. Between two deafening reports he heard a horse snort nervously. That much was natural, but following that he heard a grunted oath. He yelled for Matt and lunged toward the sound.

A PICKET rope snatched at his ankles and he went down beneath a flash of flame that was too level for lightning and too close. A horse reared high above him as he rolled and a murky figure leaped sidelong to dodge those flailing hoofs. Lightning blazed with dazzling brilliance and Sinclair saw a second figure stooped above a picket rope. He caught the glint of slashing steel.

He jerked his feet up under him and thrust his body in a long low dive. His shoulder struck the back of a man's knees, and the man came down on top of him. A second shot cracked close to Sinclair's ear and a horse squealed in sudden agony. Jim twisted and lunged back, driving his weight down on a writhing shape. Lightning showed him the tongue of blue steel that slashed across at him and he blocked it with a forearm sweep that missed the steel but struck beneath it at a flailing arm. The impact paralyzed the striking hand and the knife fell free, slithering down along Jim's wrist.

He heard the man's explosive grunt and bent his head below a chopping blow of a gun. There was no lightning now and the man's clubbed gun came down again. Jim's face was crushed for a moment into the rough cloth of the man's shirt. A belt buckle scraped his chin. He brought his knee up hard and reached out blindly for the flailing gun. But he missed and went limp momentarily as a glancing blow fell stunningly across his head.

A hand closed on the back of his shirt and lifted him. He felt the man beneath him struggle free. The hand released him and he fell loosely onto dusty sod. A rasping whisper came down to him. "Don't shoot again, you fool; the gun-flash would give 'em a target. Come on—we've got to high-tail."

But even as he lay in that small death that borders unconsciousness, powerless to move, tortured by the ache that seemed about to split his skull, Sinclair's mind clung to one bewildering fact. There was an odor in his nostrils that he could not place; a not-unpleasant tang, familiar, yet not proper to this time or place. It puzzled him.

He was aware of the sharp spat of

gunfire above him, the sounds scaled down by the rattle and bang of the heavier artillery of the storm. He heard Matt Timbro's mighty voice blare forth in stark profanity. Rain slapped his face and was gone; came again in a blinding sheet, ice cold. He sat up gasping. Matt Timbro knelt beside him, his face ghastly in the weird blue flare that blazed about them.

"You bad hurt, Jim?"

"Headache, that's all." They had to shout to top the tumult that surrounded them. "Did they—?"

Timbro yelled, "No! Only one horse loose. You must've jumped 'em before they got more than started. . . . Listen!"

Through a gap in the wall of sound, Sinclair caught the faint far-distant drum of hoofs. Mingled with it came the keen high shouts of men. Jim struggled up. "Get goin', Matt! It's a stampede!"

Thunder crashed around them again, drowning his words. But Timbro understood. They wheeled together and ran, breasting the wind and rain, along the picket line. Sinclair found his mount and vaulted up. The big buckskin pivoted and, in the glare of a lightning flash, Jim glimpsed a slender figure dragging a rearing horse down by the bridle reins. That was Johnny Anders. He saw the boy lunge and catch the saddlehorn; saw the horse drive forward crazily and whip the boy into his seat. Then darkness suddenly closed in and Sinclair rode alone.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Murder on the Hoof!

HE turned instinctively to the southeast. The herd's bedground had been to the west of the camp and the wind was from the northwest. The cattle would run down wind. No matter what their fright they would turn their tails to that drenching whip of windy rain. Once on his course Jim gave his mount free rein and horse and rider hurled themselves against a night that was alternately a dense black wall and a sea of fire.

He came alongside the herd at last, riding the outer fringe of the stampede. Beside him the cattle moved like a tempestuous stream lit fitfully by lightning flares. Horns tossed like whitecaps on that angry tide. Ahead, a gun-flame stabbed into the inky sky like a serpent's fang but the crack of the shot was lost in the wild tumult of storm and hoofs.

The long smooth rhythm of the buckskin's stride changed suddenly into a jerky dance and Sinclair kicked his feet loose from the stirrups, his body tense. He knew the cause of that uneven stride and held his breath. They were crossing a prairie dog town; an area of mounds and holes in which a slight mis-step would mean a fall and death. It seemed impossible that a horse could pick his way at headlong speed through such a maze but the buckskin hardly slowed his pace. A quick sidestep, a quarter turn and then the long smooth swinging stride again.

Sinclair let out his pent-up breath. Behind him, a man's shrill yell cut through the thunder of the herd and was lost. Sinclair shuddered as the sound pinched out, not certain whether that long cry was one of triumph or despair.

For even as he risked his own life the burden of responsibility for the lives of other men lay heavily on him. He had seen, one time, the body of a man who had gone down before a stampede such as this and the horror of that memory sickened him. Eight men had ridden guard tonight and Matt Timbro and Johnny Anders made ten. Ten besides Sinclair himself, all swept like chips upon the crest of this mad tidal wave. Or were there ten? That yell might have meant. . .

Through the bloody glare of a close-striking flash he saw the front ranks of the running herd. He whipped one gun

aloft and fired, hurling the buckskin in against the mass. The red tongue of another gun-shot answered his, not far ahead. A tossing horn ripped through Jim's trouser-leg and grazed his knee. The buckskin struck a moving wall and was tossed back; struck it again and then again.

How long that struggle lasted Sinclair never knew. It seemed an age. Time after time he flung himself against the avalanche, clubbing his weight against the outer ranks to make them turn. Beside him, behind him, other men worked in unison.

If they could turn the leaders, force them to swing until the herd ran in a milling circle, they would run themselves down. Any obstruction in their path—a fence, a deep ravine—would mean swift disaster. For nothing short of death could stop the herd until exhaustion blotted out their fear.

Once Sinclair heard Matt Timbro's bull-like voice just back of him and once, in the wild brilliance of a lightning flash, he saw a rider out ahead of the stampede, the horse stretched out as he raced desperately to keep ahead of the black juggernaut, the rider bent far forward on the horse's neck. He could not recognize the man nor could he know the outcome of that race. When the lightning flashed again there was no horseman there. Had he won clear or was he crushed beneath those pounding hoofs?

IF any man went down that night, it would be murder! The thought beat ceaselessly on Sinclair's brain. Murder! For this stampede was no mere accident. It was contrived, deliberate. That knowledge bred a seething rage in Sinclair. Two men had tried first to raid the picket line, to set the Sinclair men afoot. "They didn't figure that all the boys would already be with the herd," Jim thought. "By stampedin' the remounts first they figured to leave us stranded."

Well, they had failed in that, at least. Sinclair's chance presence on the picket line had defeated that small detail of the plan but he got little satisfaction out of that victory. His mind went back now to that sharp struggle as the storm began. That odor as his face pressed hard against a denim shirt . . .

He identified that odor suddenly and frowned. Vinegar! that was it: vinegar! Nothing else had just that sharp clean fragrance. And yet, what would account for vinegar on a man's shirt? Whiskey, yes. Tobacco, sweat, the smell of food . . . But vinegar!

A branch whipped across Sinclair's face and for a time his mind was occupied with other things. Other branches lashed him unmercifully and he bent low lest there be larger ones to rake him off the buckskin's back. There was a lurching drop that half unseated him, a stride or two when water splashed beneath the buckskin's feet, and then a wrenching climb that drove the saddlehorn against Jim's chest. Then level ground.

"That was a creek," Jim thought. What creek?

By daylight it would have been possible to see what ground was won or lost or whether the course of the stampede were changed; but in this hell of flame and sound no man could tell how far he rode from victory, how close to death.

It seemed to Sinclair that the cattle's speed had decreased a little but he could not be sure. He knew however that his horse was tiring under him, that his hard lunges at that stubborn wall lacked something of their former viciousness. Tired horses on a ride like this were dangerous. And if Sinclair's big buckskin felt the strain the other horses must be staggering.

He was aware at last of a diminishing

of sound. There was still the rumbling roar of hoofs but the thunder's cannonade was lessening. A figure loomed beside Sinclair and caught his bridle rein.

"That you, Sinclair? . . . We've got 'em circlin'. They're slowin' down."

The buckskin plowed to a stiff-legged halt, head low, dispirited. A pin-point of light burned steadily far to the left and Sinclair stared at it. That must be the campfire, he thought. How the cook had kept it going through such a downpour was a miracle, but there it was. He said, "That you, Timbro?" And heard Timbro's, "Yes."

"Where's all the boys?"

Timbro spoke as in a daze. "God knows! I seen guns flashin' now and then, but hell, I couldn't keep track of 'em."

A horse lumbered past and turned as Timbro yelled. It came back toward them and Timbro called, "Who's that?" The answer came back clear and strong. "McBride. Who's that?"

The third horse nosed in between Timbro and Sinclair to form a friendly little island in the storm. The herd swept past them endlessly but not so swiftly now. The initial terror that had driven them was almost gone. They moved on their momentum now.

Matt Timbro rubbed his sleeve across his face. "What started 'em?" he asked.

McBride's answer came in short, tired sentences. "I was on the camp side o' the herd just before it started," he said. "Heard some shootin' over there and next thing I knew a bunch o' men rode past me, straight at the herd, yellin' like a bunch o' Indians. The herd was uneasy anyway, on account o' the storm. I started in after them jaspers, but just then a bolt o' lightnin' struck about a rod ahead o' me and my horse come untwisted on me. Time I got him straightened out, I had some ridin' to do to even catch up."

THE silence lengthened after that and Timbro broke it with an oath. "Looks like somebody would've come past us by now. They wouldn't all have headed for the fire . . ."

Sinclair was conscious of the gun in his right hand. He lifted it and pulled the hammer back. Its orange tongue stabbed high above his head, a beacon light. Far to the right two thin flashes answered it. An instant passed. A third flash showed far to the left. . . . They counted six, each flash a man. But only six . . .

"Three here makes nine," Timbro said heavily. "One unaccounted for. . . . It might be worse."

"Two," Sinclair said. "You're forgettin' Johnny Anders. Countin' him, there was eleven of us."

The rain ceased suddenly and far to the north Sinclair glimpsed a star or two in a thin strip of clearing sky. He shrugged and turned his horse back to the right. Timbro accompanied him. McBride turned left. And so the slow roll-call began.

Sinclair's body sagged now beneath a burden greater than his weariness. They met one man, then two, then one again. They shook hands soberly like men who meet after a long absence, their joy in meeting dampened by a nameless fear. Dawn broke before they met McBride again; a chill grey dawn above a chill grey world.

Timbro greeted him. "We've met four of 'em; and us three here makes seven. Who have you seen?"

"Dupree's back there, and Masterson. And Billy Chance is at the camp. He caught a slug in his shoulder when that outfit jumped us; lost his horse and headed for the fire. He's lost some blood but he'll pull through . . ." McBride paused, gulped, then blurted out the rest of it. "The Anders boy . . . His horse went down, back where we crossed the creek. He's . . . dead."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Into the Smoke

THEY buried Johnny Anders that morning beneath a spreading cottonwood that overlooked the trail. Standing at the head of that lonely grave while morning sunlight bathed a sodden world, Sinclair felt the need for words and knew his own supply of them must be inadequate. A funeral hush lay on the little group of stern faced men about that grave and Sinclair sensed their expectancy.

"He was our friend. He risked his life for us, and lost it." His voice was husky, low. He thought, "I brought him into this. I thought I was protectin' him!" Out of the past, words came to him. "Dust unto dust," he said. "You made a hand, Johnny. We won't forget."

Matt Timbro walked beside him down the gentle slope toward the camp. They were halfway down before Timbro broke the leaden silence with a single word: Why?"

A horseman topped the ridge north of the camp and came down toward it at an easy lope. Watching him, Sinclair gave vent to the resentment smouldering in him. "They didn't want our cattle in the pens, Matt. That's all." His voice was level and controlled but there was passion back of it. "Ed Brandt is an ambitious man. Johnny was tellin' me about him yesterday. . . . Some folks would say he was a greedy man."

The horseman reached the camp ahead of them. Sinclair saw him dismount and walk stiffly to the fire to stand, back to the blaze, awaiting them.

"Besides bein' marshal, Brandt is somethin' of a financier. He owns a store, the bank, a gamblin' joint and three saloons. He's done real well! . . . But he ain't satisfied. He's speculatin' now in beef. Seems he's collected him a herd. As to how he collected it—Well, there's a difference of opinion. A lot of cattle out of the various trail herds have disappeared right about here. Before we left, the cattleman's association told me this town of Butte was just about the one bad spot that's left along the trail. Some folks figure Brandt's the cause of that. Anyway, he's got cows to sell and he figures competition might drive the price down. There's buyers in town now; more comin' tomorrow. And no cattle—only Brandt's."

Timbro nodded. "Which explains the man we met at Osage fork!"

"I reckon so. Brandt put that man there to warn trail drivers to keep off. Ordinarily, Butte would welcome the men and the herds, but not right now. Them that didn't heed Brandt's warnin' hit trouble when they got to Butte. That's what happened to Johnny Anders' outfit."

"And they let him get away with it!"

Sinclair shrugged. "Brandt's a killer and he's got killers around him. It's only fifty miles to Osage. Most trail bosses would rather make that extra drive than buck the game. But not me!" Sinclair's voice took on an added note of bitterness. "Oh, no! I had to make a fine, brave show! I told the folks back home I'd clear the trail. So I called Brandt's bluff. . . . And Johnny Anders' life was the chip I used to call it with!"

Timbro shot a startled glance at him. "Don't talk like that! It ain't your fault."

They halted just short of the campfire and the man who had ridden down from the north stepped out to meet them. It was Sheriff H. P. Allison. He said, "I hear you've had some trouble here. I just rode out to see if I—"

Sinclair's crisp question interrupted him. "Who told you that?"

It startled Allison. "Why, I don't know," he said. "It was common talk in town. Folks said the storm started your herd to runnin'."

"Not the storm," Sinclair said softly. "Men. They rode down on us just as the storm broke, yellin' and shootin'. The same men that started the talk you heard."

"That's right!" Timbro said suddenly. "Nobody else would know there was a stampede!"

ALLISON stood motionless, his eyes fixed curiously on Sinclair's face. Matt Timbro said, "But hell, that ain't a-gonna help us much. Runnin' down talk like that is like tryin' to stalk a coyote. You'd never get close to the man that started it."

"What'd you do if you did find 'em?" Allison asked gently, his gaze still curiously intent.

"We lost a man last night," Sinclair replied. "His horse went down in front of the stampede. If I was to find the man that set them cattle to runnin' I'd try real hard to make him regret it some. I surely would!"

Something in his eyes seemed to answer whatever question might have been in Allison's mind.

"I'm gettin' old," Allison said slowly. "Too old, maybe, for the job I hold. Years back I could've handled this myself. Now . . . Well, I've waited for a man to come along to help me." He paused and shot a sidelong glance at Jim Sinclair. "You're the Whistler, ain't you? Or am I wrong?"

"Folks call me that," Sinclair agreed.

"Thought so! Course I know the Whistler's a U. S. Deputy Marshal called Jim Bonnet; but seems like I heard too that him and Jim Sinclair was one and the same."

Sinclair nodded. "I dropped my last name when I took my first job. The idea then was to see if I could get along without the backin' of my dad's name and money. Once Uncle Sam gets you ticketed a certain way it takes a lot o' red tape to get it changed. I've let it ride."

Allison barely waited for Sinclair to pause. "I've got a job for you!" he snapped.

"What job?"

"The job of jerkin' this county out of the hands of crooks! The job of punishin' the men that stampeded your herd! It's all the same!"

Matt Timbro jumped. "You *know—?*"

Allison chuckled. "You said somethin' awhile ago about stalkin' a coyote, didn't you? A man that'd stampede a herd of cattle is worse'n any coyote; he's a skunk! You ought to be able to locate the guilty one just by the smell."

"By the smell!" The words untied a kink in Sinclair's brain. The smell—of vinegar! Yesterday, in Mary Travis's cafe, a tilting table had upset a cruet of vinegar. Sinclair remembered that now; remembered the thin brown wave that had spilled into Ed Brandt's lap. And he remembered, too, the smell of vinegar upon the clothing of the man who had gone down beneath his charge there on the picket line. Ed Brandt!

He turned. "Timbro! From now on until I take over again, you're boss. *Sabe?* Set the boys to roundin' up the strays. You got no time to waste if we're to make delivery tomorrow. But get this straight: No Sinclair man is to set foot in Butte before tomorrow noon, and not then unless I personally give the order. If you don't hear from me, swing west and drive to Osage. Right?"

He wheeled, not waiting for Timbro's answer. "Sheriff Allison, I'd take it as a special favor if you'd stay here. There's been a crime committed here; suppose you investigate it? Your presence back in town might be—embarrassin'. O. K.?"

He took Allison's silence for assent. The big buckskin reared and pivoted as Sinclair raked him with the spurs. Matt Timbro's yell rose high above the clatter of departing hoofs. "Wait, Jim! Take me

along!" But Sinclair did not pause.

Mud flew beneath the buckskin's hoofs as horse and rider charged the slope that led toward Butte.

Timbro swore. "Doggone his hide, they'll kill him sure! He can't clean out a gang like Brandt's alone!"

Sheriff H. P. Allison turned slowly. "I ain't so all-fired sure o' that!" Allison said softly. "I been hearin' tales about this man they call the Whistler. I doubted them." He smiled. "I don't doubt 'em any more, Timbro. Years ago I seen a kid named William Bonney kill a man and I thought I'd never see that kind of gun speed again. William Bonney was better known as Billy the Kid. Yesterday in town I seen this Sinclair youngster shuck a pair of guns. He's got the same smooth easy speed that Bonney had."

He turned and walked a little stiffly toward his horse. "But if he thinks he can leave me out of this rumpus he's wrong, Timbro. I've waited too long. Ed Brandt fooled me at first. He was rough, tough and ugly, but I thought he meant well. I even let him get me in his debt. With him doin' most of the work, I had time to spare. I'm gettin' old and I appreciated that. I took to drinkin' too much. Time I realized what Brandt really was, it was too late for me to do much about it. My hands was tied."

He mounted heavily and turned to grin at Matt Timbro. But his lips were trembling. "I reckon you think I'm just a garrulous old man, eh? And maybe I am. But I been prayin', Timbro, that some day a man would come along that'd help me break the hold Ed Brandt has got on me and on the town. I figure Jim Sinclair's the man. Timbro, if Sinclair will get rid o' Brandt for me, so help me God before I die, I'll—I'll get back my self-respect!"

His voice broke, and Timbro felt an unwonted tightness in his throat. Matt Timbro was not sentimental, but there was something strangely pitiful behind the hope he read in Allison's eyes.

"Wait, Allison!" Timbro wheeled and faced the men just coming down from Johnny Anders' grave. "Listen, men! You're fired! You ain't workin' for the Sinclair Cattle Company any more. You sabe that? And neither am I. Havin' officially fired the lot of you, I quit!"

He grinned. "Now hit leather, you terriers! If you ain't heeled, *get* heeled! Because where we're goin' we'll be doin' our talkin' in smoke! . . . You, Cookie, fork a bronc and come with us! Them boys'll know better'n to leave that herd without me tellin' 'em."

He paused to meet McBride's bewildered stare. "But what's it all about, Matt?" McBride asked earnestly. "What's the idea sayin' we're fired?"

Timbro laughed. "Last thing Sinclair said to me was this: 'No Sinclair man is to set foot in Butte.' But I never had a job yet I couldn't look it in the eye and tell it to go to hell, and I ain't startin' now! We ain't Sinclair men no more and we ain't tied! . . . Let's go to town!"

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Brandt's Hand Is Called

IN the back room of the Oasis, Butte's biggest and most ornate saloon, Ed Brandt sat motionless, far forward in his chair, his body tense, his ears listening. Through a window opening to the south the distant sound of whistling came to Brandt's attentive ears; of whistling mingled with the thud of running hoofs. The sound increased, a thin shrill wail unlike any whistling Brandt had ever heard before, as keen and high and piercing as the music of a flute.

Brandt shifted in his chair. "Old Allison was right," he said hoarsely. "He told me Sinclair was the Whistler."

Lanky Tolliver, his right side draped with bandages, rapped out an oath. "What if he is? A slug'll stop his whistlin'. What's eatin' you?"

The silence held while minutes dragged and Brandt's restlessness increased. He reached out hurriedly and grasped a bottle from the table at his side. The neck of it clattered against the rim of the glass as Brandt poured his drink.

Quick footsteps thudded in the outer room and Brandt's hand halted with the glass half lifted to his lips. Sailor Blaine crashed through the door.

"He's comin'!" Blaine said eagerly. "Afoot, with that big brown horse o' his walkin' beside him. He stopped first to talk with that Travis girl. . . Hey, Brandt, what's wrong with you?"

Ed Brandt stood up; tossed off his drink. He flushed, the color surging up behind the pallor of his twitching face. "Nothin's wrong with me, Blaine. Mind your own business, damn you! . . . Tolliver, you take the lookout post. Blaine and I will be out front. We'll fix it so he'll be facin' you, so there'll be no stink raised about his bein' shot in the back. Get a bead on him and hold it. The minute he makes a move, you let him have it! Blaine and I'll unlimber too so it'll look like an ordinary shoot-out. Got it? . . . Come on, then!"

He stepped outside and closed the door. The big front room was empty except for a man in a white apron polishing glasses behind the bar. Brandt spoke to him, his voice carrying barely across the room.

"Get that gun o' yours where you can reach it, Burt. We ain't apt to need you, but—"

The barman spat. "I'm here, ain't I?" he said phlegmatically.

Brandt waited, listening. His eyes slid rapidly about the room. It was an ornate place and Brandt was proud of it. A bank of mirrors stood behind the bar and over them a lifesize nude in pinkish paint reclined upon a gilded couch. Across the room another painting showed blue coated men engaged in bloody strife with men in grey. A cannon belched red flame across the scene and horses reared in wild eyed agony. The cannon's mouth looked oddly real . . .

A shaft of light shot through a small round opining in the cannon's mouth. It made a yellow bar that slanted down to paint a yellow oval on the floor. Brandt frowned. It was careless of Tolliver to open that porthole before closing the door of the closet behind it. The shaft of light was blotted out suddenly and Brandt heard the thud of a door closing.

A shallow counter thrust out into the room from the wall just to the left of the street door and Brandt crossed to stand beside that counter. Blaine followed him. Brandt whispered stridently, "I'll do the talkin' now. Facin' us here he'll also be facin' Tolliver. Keep far enough to the side so you'll be out of line."

HIS fear was replaced now by confidence. After all, what was there about this whistling man different from other men? He might be fast with guns, but the hole in the cannon's mouth yonder would offset that. More than once in the past that hole had been Brandt's margin between defeat and victory. There was a closet back of that canvas battle scene and a stool from which an expert marksman could control the room. A sliding panel hid the opening in the cannon's mouth; but even when that panel was removed, with the door of the closet closed the man hidden there sat in darkness that left the hole invisible.

The street door swung inward suddenly and Brandt stiffened. Sinclair came through, took two quick steps and stopped. Brandt noticed that Sinclair's arms were not swinging. They hung relaxed so that

the half-closed hands brushed holstered guns.

Sinclair spoke gently, his voice unstressed. "Expectin' me, eh, Brandt?"

"Why, no . . ."

But Sinclair's smile gave Brandt the lie. "Then you're a fool! You didn't think you could stampede my herd and get away with it?"

"Stampede your herd? Why, I—"

"Don't lie! I've got the goods on you, Brandt! . . . You killed a man last night. The herd went over him. . . . You ever see a man after a stampedin' herd had pounded him to a pulp? It ain't a pretty sight, Brandt. Not when you like the man."

"What's that to me?" Brandt's words cut, sharp and truculent, through Sinclair's pause.

A thread of light came into being suddenly and Sinclair stared at it. It slanted down from the mouth of a painted cannon! It thickened gradually and then blacked out. Sinclair caught the soft click of a latch. . . . Lanky Tolliver had been hurried, careless. The door that he had closed belatedly had failed to latch.

Sinclair's eyes lost focus again, became impersonal and still. But he was wary now. Both Brandt and Blaine were poised to draw. Between them lay a space six feet across through which that cannon's mouth was visible. The barman, motionless behind his bar, was also dangerous. Those details etched themselves on Sinclair's mind. There was a man behind that cannon's mouth. This was a trap!

Brandt's voice went on. "I don't know what you're drivin' at, Sinclair. But I'll tell you this! You came here knowin' that you wasn't welcome and you hadn't been here five minutes before you'd picked a fight. I let that pass. Now here you are again, makin' war-talk. I'm sick of it. Damn you, Sinclair, if you're lookin' for trouble you can damn sure find it! This time we're set for you!"

"Why, yes." Sinclair's reply was almost whimsical. "I see you are!"

He raised both hands unhurriedly until they touched his belt. Behind the canvas wall that masked his hiding place Lanky Tolliver watched that movement and let his pressure on the trigger of his gun relax an ounce or two. That was unwise.

Sinclair's knees broke with startling suddenness. His body dropped to half its height, then drove ahead. He caught Blaine's belt with both his hands. The sudden weight jerked Blaine ahead. Tolliver's shot smashed belatedly across the room and Sinclair felt Blaine's body jerk.

That swift attack caught Brandt, as well as Tolliver, off guard. But Brandt recovered instantly. His hand described a short swift arc. His gun whipped clear. Blaine was hit, falling. The trap, that much of it at least, had failed. But that was but a part of it. Sinclair was down within a yard of Brandt, his hands still clutching Blaine. He could not draw. Brandt could not miss!

A SECOND shot came from the cannon's mouth and this time Brandt saw the bullet rip the planking of the floor. Even as his own gun came up to aim Brandt's mind called Tolliver a fool. "He's scared and shootin' wild!" Brandt thought. "But I can't miss!"

Perhaps he was too sure; or perhaps his confidence delayed his fire. He saw Sinclair's forward motion checked against the barrier of Blaine's weight; saw Sinclair jerk both feet ahead, reverse, and fling his body back. But even then Brandt took his time.

Out of the corner of his eyes Sinclair watched Brandt's draw and gauged the speed of it. His backward leap was shrewdly timed. His feet flailed up with

vicious force. They struck Brandt's gun. The weapon spun, unfired, above Brandt's head. It fell behind the counter, out of reach. Brandt yelled and hurled his body at the door.

That kick flung Sinclair to the left. He landed like a cat, on hands and knees. The counter jutting out into the length of the room sheltered him now from Tolliver's fire, but another gun spoke deafeningly across the bar. The bullet smashed the flimsy counter within a foot of Sinclair's head. Still crouching, he whipped both guns up into line. The shots came almost simultaneously, close-spaced in one short stuttering burst.

The barman toppled back with a sort of slow dignity. Two black holes soiled the whiteness of his apron, both of them within a space that could have been covered with a playing card. His elbows hooked on a shelf beneath the mirrors. It tipped and sent a pyramid of glass to smash with jangling dissonance upon the floor. The man went down.

Beyond the end of the counter Sinclair could see once more that shaft of light that slanted out of the cannon's mouth. He stood up carefully, guns held in readiness. But no shot came from the ambush behind that painted screen. Somewhere in the back of the house a man took six running steps. A door slammed shut. That slamming door marked the retreat of Lanky Tolliver.

Blaine and the man behind the bar were dead. But Brandt was gone. The street doors still swung to and fro from the momentum of Brandt's flight. Sinclair stared at them and swore. The fact that he was still alive, that he had come unscathed out of a trap like this, was victory of a sort, but to Sinclair it was a victory tinged with bitterness. He had come for Brandt and he had failed.

As if in answer to his thoughts Brandt's voice came to him from the street. "Come on, you men! You're deputies, the whole damn lot of you! Let's show these gun-fightin' trail drivers that they can't hooraw this town! Let's smoke him out of there!"

Sinclair lunged forward suddenly. The swinging doors flew wide ahead of him.

"You needn't, Brandt. I'm here! Don't call for help to do your dirty work! Do it yourself!"

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Whistler's Gun-Swift

OUT in the street, Brandt spun about, the pistol in his right hand half raised. He froze before the threat of Sinclair's guns. The tableau held as if the central figures had been carved in stone.

The crowd split suddenly just back of Brandt, and Sinclair sensed their lack of unity. Some were Brandt's friends and some were not. This sudden crisis caught them unprepared. Besides, Sinclair's challenge put the matter up to Brandt.

Through the hush, Sinclair's keen ears caught the distant drum of running hoofs. The sound registered on his mind but it had no meaning. He was intent upon Brandt's pallid face. In a strange way, he pitied Brandt. Brandt was afraid, yet he would have to fight. He had builded him a name as a fighting man and, if he faltered now, that name and the foundations of his very life would crumble. His name would be a mockery, a taunt.

But he delayed. A pack of horsemen swept into the southern end of the long street and the crowd before the Oasis shifted a little to face the charge. A voice shrilled out, "Here comes the sheriff! H'ray fer Allison!"

Brandt turned uncertainly. Men had crowded in, surrounding him. Sinclair stepped down off of the porch. This was

a rescue in a sense, but it was a postponement as well. The crowd impeded him. He caught sight of Brandt once and then lost him again. He heard Matt Timbro's voice roar out his name. He did not answer it.

Across the street, a horse wheeled from a hitching rail and lunged, crazed by a pair of cruel spurs. He plowed a furrow in the crowd. A figure lay along his neck and Sinclair glimpsed Brandt's taut, distorted face. The horse fought clear.

Men surged about Sinclair, necks craned, their bodies binding him. He struck out savagely. Bull-like, he drove against the yielding mass. A pathway cleared. Far down the street Brandt sat erect and yelled. His voice came back defiantly.

A rifle's metallic crack cut short that yell and Sinclair saw the gun-flame lick out redly from the doorway of the Star Cafe. He let his own gun, still unfired, swing down. Brandt's horse lurched heavily and fell. Sinclair put down his head and ran.

Brandt struck heavily and rolled. But he was up again. He ran, bent low, beneath a hitching rail, across the walk, into the open doorway of a store.

Sinclair plunged after him. That doorway yawned ahead of him, black, threatening. He went straight through. Midway along a narrow corridor, Brandt turned at bay. His hands were empty now. Jim sheathed his guns.

"You couldn't dodge it, Brandt," Sinclair said evenly. "Your string's played out. . . . Go for your gun!"

Brandt's hand streaked down. Sinclair's knees bent, his muscles flowing with uncanny speed. His guns belched fire. Brandt's shot cracked out belatedly, unaimed and wild. He teetered back a step or two, off balance from the smashing shock of leaden slugs. He tripped and fell.

Sinclair stood for a moment motionless, suddenly weary. The nervous strain of the last twenty-four hours fell away from him, leaving him with a sense of emptiness. He sheathed his guns and turned; walked out into the sunlit street.

A tumult greeted him. He recognized Matt Timbro's voice, and Allison's. Allison gripped his hand and wrung it.

Across the street the door of the Star Cafe stood open and a figure framed in it caught Sinclair's eye. He thought, "She's beautiful!" She came toward him and he saw the crowd make way for her. He was staring into Mary Travis's dark eyes, reading their bewilderment. "Brandt's dead," he said softly. "But I killed him. Your bullet hit his horse. What made you shoot?"

She said, "I couldn't bear to see him—get away. Not after—"

Sinclair reached out and touched her arm. "You loved Johnny, didn't you?"

She shook her head. "I liked him. Maybe I loved him, a little. But not the way he wanted me to." Tears welled suddenly to her eyes. "But I might have married him!" she said. Her voice rose stridently. "I hate this town! It killed my dad; it's tortured me. Now it's killed *him*. I might have even—cheated him—to get away."

Jim nodded suddenly, then said a thing he never fully understood. He said, "You're goin' home with me! Matt Timbro's wife will mother you. . . . And there's a school that you can teach. It's nice down there. There's nothin' there to be remindin' you . . . of this."

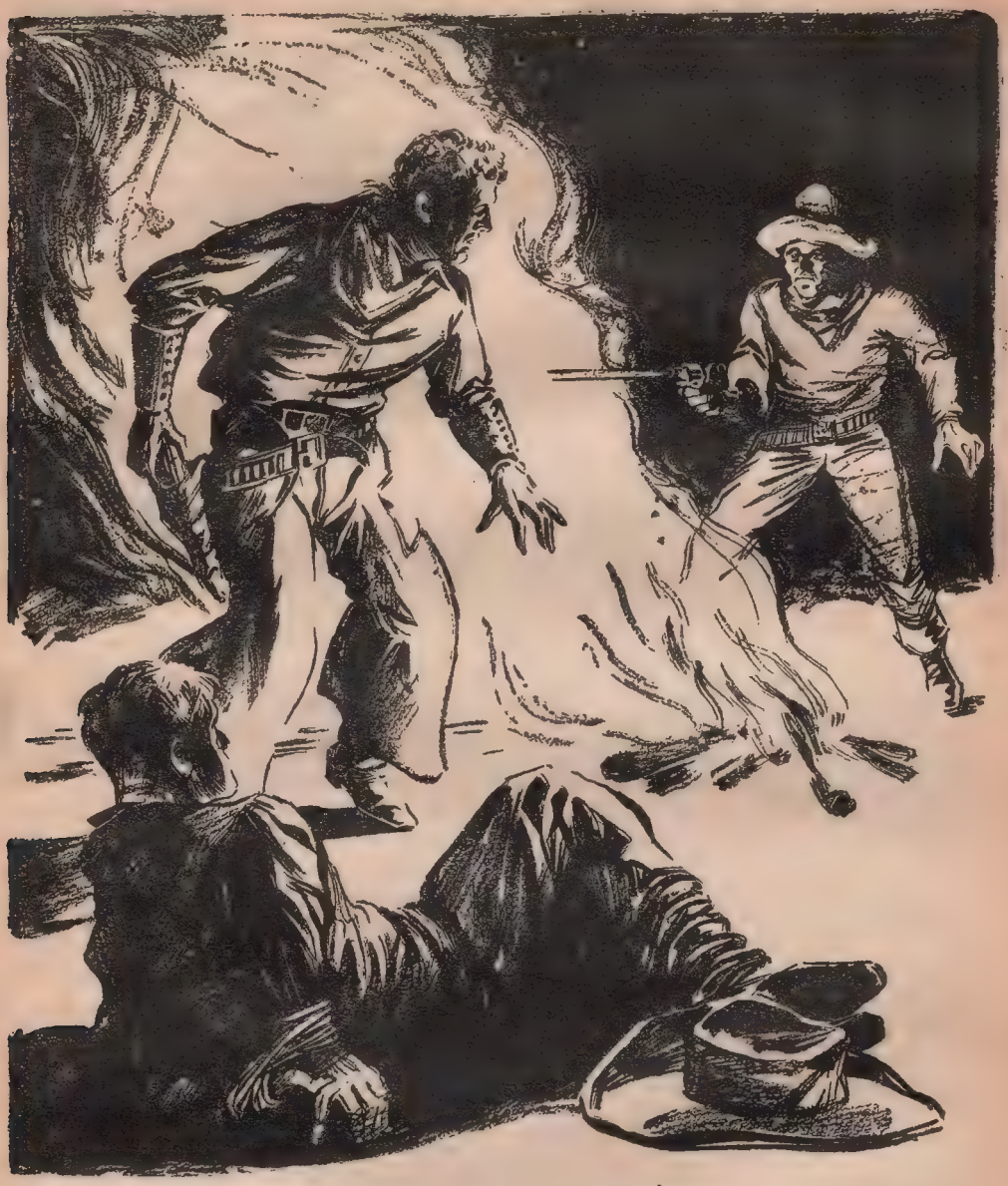
He added brusquely, lest she might misunderstand. "There's lots of fine clean boys down there. You'll be—real popular."

And suddenly he felt a fool.

But Mary Travis nodded solemnly. "I'll go," she said—and smiled.

THE END

# GUNPOWDER PAYOFF



By Gunnison Steele

*(Author of "Derelict's Gun-Code," etc.)*

**To Curley Brand, outlaw, a debt was a debt and it had to be paid, whether payment was made with the clink of bloodstained gold-pieces or the vicious snarl of crashing guns.**

EMBERS of an outlaw's campfire threw a red reflection over Curley Brand's handsome, craggy features. Contempt was plain in his tawny eyes as he stared across the fire at his partner, Jake Hawley.

Hawley, Curley knew, wanted to kill him. He read it in the squat, red-bearded

renegade's furtive rat eyes, in the nervous, unconscious flickings of his stub-fingered gun-hand. Hawley had wanted to kill him for some time, but lacked the guts to make the try. And now, with their quick quarrel adding fuel to his hate, his greed heightened by the stacks of money on the ground between them, that desire had become intensified.

"Get this, Jake," Curley Brand's low voice was like velvet-covered steel. "I don't deny that I'm a mean, low-down skunk. I'll admit I need hangin'. But there's one thing I always do: If I owe a debt, I pay it. And there's something I never do: I never break a promise."

"Any fool'd ruther break a promise than die with hemp around his neck!" Hawley rapped harshly.

Curley shrugged, said: "Accordin' to how yuh look at it. Back there in Casa Grande when we grabbed this mine payroll, we promised this boy's *amigos* we'd set him free, safe and sound, at daybreak—provided didn't no lead-slingin' posse come hellin' on our trail. And we told 'em, in case we did see some dust boilin' on our backtrail, we'd stick a knife in his craw and leave 'im layin'. They ain't bothered us. They won't, not till this boy gets safe back to town. And by then we'll have plenty start."

Hawley snorted his disgust. "Hell, yuh fool, the kid knows us! If we turn 'im loose he'll go back and blab it was Jake Hawley and Curley Brand what pulled the job. Every gun-slingin' sheriff in Arizona'll be watchin' the trails for us."

Curley grinned sardonically. "They already are! They'd stretch our necks just as quick, without this job against us."

"All the same," Hawley growled, "I still say we oughta slit this hombre's throat and dump 'im into the river. And that's just what I'm aimin' to do!"

An instant's silence held the little clearing, silence as pregnant with death-threat as a crouched cougar. There was only the chill whisper of the wind as it snaked through the river bottoms, the slow, restless slither of water between muddy banks.

The man lying on the ground back from the fire was smooth-faced, little more than a boy, and bound securely with rawhide thongs. He watched with a sort of fascinated terror in his eyes, conscious of the death that hovered on silent, grisly wings over the clearing.

Curley Brand's pantherish body didn't shift from its easy position over the fire, his chill eyes held their steady, contemptuous stare. "Jake, yo're a brainless, gutless snake! I say the kid goes free. Sabe?"

"I sabe yuh can go to hell! You can't —"

The snarling words stuck in the red-whiskered renegade's thick throat. He crouched there on his haunches, stubby fingers twitching nervously, a foolish grin pulling his hairy lips.

CURLEY spat suddenly, his voice cold as the wind in the brush: "Jake, I oughta gut-shoot yuh. You'd like to beef me, only yuh ain't got the nerve—not even to shoot me in the back. Our trails split, right here. You aim to drag irons?"

Slowly Jake Hawley's gorilla body stiffened. The mirthless grin became set on his sullen features. His snakish eyes gleamed redly in the fireglow, open windows revealing a black soul crawling with desire to kill.

But behind that desire, as he looked into Curley Brand's tawny eyes, was something more compelling—the certainty that death was reaching for him. Slowly his squat body relaxed. He tried to chuckle, but the sound was only a scared whimper that slid from between stiff lips.

"Hell, Curley, no need to go on a rampage. I was only foolin'. 'Course the kid

goes free, if yuh say. Ain't no need for us to—"

"Shut up!" Curley rapped shortly. "I say we're takin' different trails. You've got yore share uh the loot. Now fork yore nag and ride."

Again killer lust flared briefly in Hawley's eyes, was masked by cunning as he got slowly to his feet. "I guess yuh'll cool off by mornin', Curley," he growled. "Then I'll come back."

"Start ridin'!"

Curley Brand reared to his feet. Contemptuously he turned his back on the squat outlaw.

Evil triumph blared in Hawley's gimlet eyes. His hand snaked toward his gun. . . .

And Curley Brand whirled, writhed aside, his own hand a streak in the firelight. His .45 cleared leather with a blasting roar of flame that spewed straight toward Hawley's paunch.

The squat outlaw went over backward, death wiping the triumph abruptly from his glazing eyes. And death tightened his trigger-finger. His gun muzzle, starting to rise, spouted red.

Hot pain seared Curley's thigh, three inches above his knee. Warm blood gushed, ran down his leg.

The contempt deepened in Curley Brand's eyes as he stared at the stark body of his former henchman. "I guessed that yuh'd try that, Jake. That's why I gave yuh yore chance!"

The blond, curley-haired renegade dropped to the ground beside the fire. He bared his leg, stared with a whimsical grin at the bullet-hole through the flesh of his thigh. There was no bitterness in his eyes, nor in his heart.

Curley Brand lived a raw, careless life, with death always his saddlemate. Philosophically he had accepted the quirk of fate that had long ago sent him down the lonely, twisted trail where the owl hoots. Always he accepted the breaks as they came. Always he was quick of trigger and temper, but he never welched nor forgot a favor.

Curley Brand had his own iron creed, and if it differed from that of most other men it caused him little worry.

HE bathed the wound with cold water from the river, and the crude bandage he fashioned for it partially stopped the flow of blood.

The boy on the ground watched this procedure with something that was almost awe in his dark eyes. He had just seen a gun drawn faster than he had thought possible. He had just seen a man killed, for the first time in his life.

Once he offered: "Can I help?"

"Thanks, son," Curley grinned. "I guess I can manage. Come daylight, yuh can go back to town."

The leg bandaged, Curley lifted the burly body of the dead man easily across his broad shoulders and strode with it off through the thicket toward the river. A moment later the boy beside the fire heard a slight splash, followed by silence. He shivered, and wished for daylight.

Curley Brand returned and seated himself beside the fire. He paid no further attention to the prisoner, but stared broodingly into the blaze.

The young fellow was paymaster for the Red Star Mining Company in Casa Grande, twenty miles away on the edge of the foothills. His name was Collins. Curley Brand and Jake Hawley had kidnaped him from the Red Star offices, along with the mine payroll, amounting to about three thousand dollars, at midevening. Curley had told an office assistant that Collins would be released safely the next morning at daybreak, in the event that no efforts were made to prevent their getaway. Otherwise, he had promised grimly that the boy's dead body

would be found in the dust of the trail.

As they rode southward, they had not been pursued. Quite plainly, both his promises had been taken at face value.

Twenty miles from Casa Grande, in the depths of the matted Wolf River bottoms, they had camped for the night. There, inadvertently, the boy had revealed that he recognized the two renegades from the various reward notices with their photographs printed thereon scattered over three states.

Jake Hawley had wanted to kill him, and that had brought on the quarrel which had resulted in Hawley's sudden demise.

Till far in the night Curley Brand brooded over the fire, his mind filled with memories. His wounded leg had stopped bleeding, but it ached with a steady throb. He knew it needed a doctor's attention, but that was impossible.

Finally he covered Collins with the dead Hawley's blanket; crawled into his own blankets and slept.

Ten hours later, just as red shafts from the rising sun were probing into the mist-shrouded river bottoms, he rode out onto the plain. Half an hour before, young Collins had almost reluctantly mounted Hawley's horse and headed back toward Casa Grande. Curley grinned whimsically at the remembrance.

With a little urging, he knew, the boy would have turned his back on Casa Grande and ridden away with him.

Curley rode eastward toward the Mogollons, a hundred and fifty miles away.

He rode slowly, for his wounded leg was sore and stiff. The wound was ugly and inflamed, and each jolt of his mount sent hot pain ripping through his entire leg. He made only sixty miles that day.

That night, as he sat beside his campfire on the banks of a tiny stream that came down out of a range of low hills, he eyed the wound dubiously. The day's ride had aggravated it. His leg was red and swollen from ankle to groin, and hot with fever. Nauseous pain pulsed like a stream of fire through the entire leg.

Again he washed the wound in cold water, rebandaged it. It was all he could do. He slept little that night.

He was in the saddle again at daybreak. By now even the calf of his leg had swollen tight in his boot. Every step of the horse sent searing pain slashing through bone and flesh. But Curley Brand rode doggedly. He had to keep on the move.

He was afraid, if he stopped, that he'd never start again. And he knew, too, that news of the hold-up would have been phoned over the country by now. Posses would be watching the trails.

He stuck to the edge of the foothills, slanting southward, his fever-racked eyes wary for prowling lawmen. He rode with lips curled sardonically, battling the pain and nausea that was trying to drag him from the saddle. He was fighting a losing battle, and he knew it.

About mid-morning, pain and fever and weariness won. Curley Brand fainted, and tumbled from his horse.

BUZZARDS, wheeling in low circles over the spot, drew the rider from the plain into the edge of the foothills. He was a big, dark-haired young man, dressed in sweaty ranchman's garb.

He saw the grazing horse first, then the inert figure, lying face down on the ground a hundred feet away. Warily the big rider approached, dismounted, turned the unconscious man on his back and stared down into Curley Brand's pain-drawn features.

The big man straightened suddenly, backed away, and a gun appeared with dazzling speed in his hand. The look of a hunted wolf flashed into his dark eyes, a snarl twisted his lips. Deliberately the gun leveled on Curley's chest.

Then the rider shook his head bewilderedly. Slowly he lowered the gun. Indecision tortured his dark eyes.

"I oughta beef 'im where he lays!" he muttered fiercely. "That's what I oughta do. But I can't do murder, not even now. Curley Brand! God, I thought . . .!"

He holstered his gun, took Curley's guns and placed them in his saddle-bags. Then he lifted the lanky outlaw's head, held a canteen to his lips. Slowly Curley Brand fought his way back from the blackness that engulfed him.

"Musta fainted," he mumbled. "Guess I'm gettin' soft!"

He stared up into the big man's grim features. Recognition seeped into his tawny eyes, and a slow grin curled his lips.

"Vance Dalton!" Curley said wonderingly. "Am I dreamin'?"

"No such luck," Dalton denied somberly. "Curley, I guess I'd oughta gut-shoot you where yuh lay. But I've tried, and can't. That's what yuh'd do to me."

Curley grimaced painfully. "Who said that?"

"Hell, do I have to be told? Ain't I watched day and night for four years, knowin' you or some o' the others'd find me sooner or later? But I hoped it wouldn't be you found me, Curley—for that meant somebody had to die!"

For a while Curley Brand lay there, staring somberly up at the sky, remembering. "I guess you got me wrong, Vance," he said at last, quietly. "I've never hunted for you. Maybe some uh the other boys did; I dunno. I quit Snake Orde's gang the same night you did, I've never seen any of them since."

"Why?" Dalton probed.

"I had a run-in with Snake, over the way he'd treated you. I told Snake I didn't blame you for kickin' over the traces, for stickin' a gun on the rest uh us and takin' the whole shebang. Then I told the whole crew to go to hell, and rode. They was a bunch uh skunks, too smelly for even me."

"I shouldn't have took all the swag thataway," Vance Dalton admitted. "We was all in on the job together—Snake, Reno Red, Strom, Booger John, you, me—the time we gutted the Hondo bank, remember? But Snake said I was yellow, an' figured to cut me outa the pot. I went crazy mad, I guess. I throwed my gun on the rest uh you boys and high-tailed with the whole six thousand dollars.

"I knowed you boys'd be lookin' for me, so I left Utah and went to Denver. And maybe yuh won't believe it, but in a Denver gamblin' joint I got slicked outa every red cent. Broke flat, I rode a rattler down here to Arizona. A year later, I filed on me a quarter-section uh good ground, managed to stock up with a few head uh cattle. Two years ago, I married—"

"Married! You—married?"

"Yes!" Dalton's flinty eyes softened. "One of the prettiest, pluckiest girls in Arizona, Lana is. And she's stood beside me when nobody else would."

"Does she know about . . .?"

"I told her, before I married her. She married me anyhow. She's made a man outa me, Curley. I've been goin' straight. *Sabe?* Straight! Now you've found me—"

"Forget about that!" Curley snapped. "I never blamed you for what yuh done. You was welcome to my part, and damn the others! Besides, you forgot what happened the day we stuck-up the Red Butte National, a year before you made yore break?"

Dalton shrugged. "I got a bad memory."

"The John Laws had laid a guntrap for us. Slim and Sonora got their's that day. And a slug knocked me from the saddle, left me layin' in the street. 'Let

'im lay!' says Snake and the others. But you rode back, with hot lead clippin' buttons offa yore shirt, grabbed me onto yore nag and fogged to hell outa that hole. I guess I owe yuh one for that."

"Didn't amount to nothin'," Dalton denied. He took Curley's twin guns from his saddle-bags, returned them to the renegade. "Curley, I'm mighty glad you ain't gunnin' for me."

The rancher looked critically at his former partner's swollen leg. "Curley, that leg needs fixin' up, pronto."

"I been aimin' to get around to it," Curley grinned wanly. "But I just hadn't had thuh chance. Vance, if yuh'll snare me my roan hoss, I guess I'll be ridin'."

"I'll catch yore nag," Dalton agreed. "But you ain't ridin' nowhere 'cept to the Star L. That's my brand, and my outfit's over yonder a short piece."

"Naw, I don't aim to—"

"Shut up!" Vance Dalton ordered. "It'll be like old times."

LOW voices seeped through a closed door from the next room. A man's voice, unsteady, jagged with helpless anger. A woman's voice—a slim, golden-haired girl, crying softly.

Curley Brand lay on the bed in the darkness, his eyes hard, slow anger kindling in his own heart. He was a wanted man, a hardened wolf of the outlaw trails, but he had always respected a good woman, held them in awe, almost. Always a woman's tears filled his heart with murder for the man who caused them.

Lana Dalton, the pretty, red-lipped girl-wife of his old outlaw pal, Vance Dalton, was crying. Curley knew why she was crying, knew her husband could not comfort her. Trouble, ugly and inevitable, was throttling the happiness of these two, threatening to take from them all they held dear in the world.

Two days had passed since Vance Dalton brought Curley to his little three-room ranch-house nestled in the shadows of the green hills. Two days of peace and quiet for Curley Brand. Dalton had told his young wife the truth about Curley. It had made no difference.

Cheerful, smiling, she had helped dress Curley's wound, had cared for him, thinking he did not see the haunting shadow of fear and worry that lurked forever in the depths of her blue eyes. He had seen the worried lines in Dalton's face, guessed at what caused his periods of brooding silence.

Now he knew. Unashamed he had listened, when they thought him asleep. Dalton had just ridden back from the cow-town of Pecos.

"I guess it's no use, honey," misery edged Dalton's voice. "We're whipped. Today was our last chance, and we've lost."

"The bank wouldn't—?"

"No. Wouldn't give a day's extension. Six more months, and we could pay out, with some to spare. But they laughed at me. Breck and Horn are behind it, of course. They own the bank, own the mortgage against the Star L. I've fought, slaved—and even begged. Now we'll lose everything."

"Maybe it's best, Vance. I—I'm afraid they'll kill you. Breck and Horn are killers—worse than killers."

"That ain't the worst of it," young Dalton's low voice became ragged. "I talked to Breck today, and he played his trump card. He—he's found out who I am!"

The girl caught her breath with dread. "Vance! You mean, he knows you rode with Snake Orde's outlaws. That you're wanted in Utah for bank robbery?"

"How he found out, I don't know. But he knows everything—all about the Hondo stick-up, the last job I helped pull. He threatened me; said if we wasn't outa

the country in two weeks, he'd turn me over to the sheriff!"

A moment there was silence in the next room, silence pregnant with misery, with fear and dread, and the black mockery of shattered hopes and dreams. Then the girl started sobbing softly.

Vance Dalton's voice ripped out harshly: "Damn 'em both to hell! There's just one way. They'll get our place, everything we have. But that wouldn't end it. They know I'm wanted: So long as them and me live, they'll hold it like a knife at my throat. They ain't fit to live. Damn 'em, I'll—"

"No, Vance, no!" Quick panic jerked Lana Dalton's voice. "You can't do that. Then you'd hang for murder, bad as they are. There must be some way out—there *must* be!"

"There's no way out, except like I said."

"That'd be worse than ever. Promise, Vance—*promise* you won't do that!"

The low voices droned on. . . .

Curley Brand, his tawny eyes bleak and bitter, lay on the soft bed beside an open window and stared broodingly at the purple hills that reared abruptly against a moonlit sky. Inexplainable fires of anger swirled in his heart. He couldn't shut out the man's ragged voice, nor the girl's miserable weeping.

There was something else, something he could never quite forget. Often, as he brooded over his lonely campfire, memories of it had returned to trouble him. . . .

The hot, dusty street of a cowtown. Blasting guns and screaming lead. Bucking horses, yelling men, the smell of burnt gunpowder, confusion. Then a searing pain in his shoulder, the despair that crawled in his heart as he lay in the bitter dust of the street, unable to move.

A plunging horse stopping beside him. A grim, reckless young face over him, a pair of strong arms lifting him atop the horse, then the escape with bullets thick about them. . . .

What was it he had told Jake Hawley, back there in the river bottoms before he killed him? "If I owe a debt, I pay it!"

He owed Vance a blood debt, and payment was long overdue!

UNDER the careful treatment of Dalton and his slim young wife, Curley Brand's leg healed quickly. A week after his arrival at the Star L, he was hobbling about the place.

Bluntly, one day, he asked Vance Dalton about the trouble that hovered over the little Star L outfit. And Dalton told him.

When Dalton filed on his acreage, he filed on land that no one who knew the situation would have touched. The strip was jammed in between two big outfits—Apache Breck's Bear Paw spread and Gabe Horn's big Scorpion brand outfit. Breck and Horn were both tight-fisted range-hogs, men who had built up their herds and increased their acreage by thievery and murder. Both employed large crews of hard-eyed, gun-quick riders who obeyed the big bosses' orders, whether it was the theft of half a thousand head of cattle from a neighboring rancher or the murder of a sickly homesteader whose few improved acres they coveted.

The strip Dalton filed on had been free land—but land which Breck and Horn considered jointly their own. They ran their cattle on it, but principally they prized it because of the big spring of clear water that spewed from the ground at the base of the hills.

Other men had filed on the strip before Dalton. None had remained longer than six months. But Dalton stayed. He brought a bride to the cabin he built, and

in the fertile soil the roots of a glorious dream were planted.

Three years Dalton had fought an uphill battle. His cattle had been killed, his haystacks burned, his fences cut. A cold-eyed gunman had started trouble with him one day in Pecos, aiming to kill him. They buried the gunman, and tales of the homesteader's gun-speed spread over the range.

But the year before had been a hard year, and Dalton had gone to the bank for a loan. It had been easily secured—too easily. Breck and Horn controlled the bank.

Their ruinous raids increased. They made sure Dalton wouldn't be able to pay the mortgage when it came due.

The twenty-five hundred dollar note, Dalton told Curley Brand, fell due in less than two weeks. And he was flat broke, his back to the wall.

Curley said little. He loafed about the place, somber, silent, forgetting his customary cheerful grin. More than one night he listened to the low, worried voices in the room adjoining his—the man's miserable, ragged, bitter; the girl's tearful, pleading, tender. But courageous.

The somberness deepened in Curley Brand's eyes; the furious anger swirled hotter in his heart. He showed Dalton the Red Star payroll, told him he'd won it playing poker in Yuma. Dalton asked no questions.

Swiftly his wounded leg improved.

"Gettin' powerful restless," he told Dalton one night. "I done stayed too long in one place. Come daylight, guess I'll be ridin' on."

Dalton didn't urge him to stay. For tomorrow, the note against the Star L came due—after tomorrow he would have no outfit, not even a roof to sleep under.

IN the gray light of dawn he bade Vance Dalton and his slim wife a somber adios, mounted his gaunt roan and rode slowly off toward the ebony hills. Vivid in his heart as he rode was the remembrance of young Dalton's grim, desperate features, of the despairing, faithful light in Lana Dalton's wide blue eyes.

Out of range of the Star L, Curley Brand swerved sharply to the east and spurred the roan to a gallop. His lips were tight, his tawny eyes mirrored the bitter anger that clawed at his heart.

An hour later, he approached Apache Breck's Bear Paw ranch buildings, asked for Breck. Breck came from the ranchhouse, hand near his gun, piercing black eyes stabbing at Curley's features.

Apache Breck was a slender man with dark, hawkish features and greasy black hair that bespoke the breed blood in him. There was a cruel set to his thin-lipped mouth, a feline quickness and grace to his movements. He was fast and deadly with a gun.

Deliberately, contemptuously his gaze raked Curley.

"What'd yuh want with me?" he demanded abruptly.

Curley returned his gaze coolly and said: "I been ridin' for Dalton the last two weeks. He sent me. He's got a proposition he craves to make you and Horn, somethin' yuh'll like. He said to meet 'im in the Blue Lantern in Pecos today at three o'clock, and he'd spill it."

"I ain't interested in nothin' Dalton says, not now," Breck sneered. "He's waited too late!"

Curley shrugged. "I just told you what he said."

He whirled the roan and rode to the south. He rode straight to Gabe Horn's Scorpion brand outfit, where he told the burly, black-bearded rancher the same thing. And received approximately the same answer—that he wasn't interested in Dalton any more.

Curley Brand left the Scorpion, headed for Pecos. He wasn't worried about

Breck and Horn—he knew they would be in the Blue Lantern at the appointed time for their tryst with Vance Dalton.

HURLEY spent several hours loafing beside a tree-shaded little stream, timing his pace so as to arrive in the sun-drenched cowtown of Pecos at twenty minutes to three. He dismounted before the rambling building labeled, "Pecos National Bank."

With a package under his arm, he went into the bank. Only one man was in the bank—the fat-bellied, bald-headed, beady-eyed man who sat in the cashier's cage. The fat man eyed Curley suspiciously, and slid a hand toward an open drawer.

Curley Brand stared bleakly, shoved the package through the window, ordered curtly: "Open 'er up!"

The banker unwrapped the package, gaped at the bundles of banknotes. Much more cordially, he asked: "You wish to open an account with us?"

"I want the note yuh got here against Dalton's Star L outfit!" Curley snapped. "And the mortgage. There's the dinero for it, with some left over."

"The Star L mortgage?" the fat man stuttered with surprise. "But I don't know you, my man. You are not Dalton. It isn't regular. I'm sorry, mighty sorry —"

Curley rapped: "Did I mention I was in a hurry? Don't matter a damn if I ain't Dalton. He sent me with the money, told me to get the note and mortgage. And I want it. Now!"

"But I'll have to see Breck and Horn," the banker stalled. "They hold the mortgage. It isn't here. I'll have to—"

Curley Brand's hand dropped to gun-butt. Stark fury flared in his eyes. His voice was a ragged snarl.

"You crave to die? There's the money —and see you give me my change. Hop, blast yuh!"

The fat banker looked into Curley's eyes, and hopped.

Five minutes later Curley Brand left the bank, with twenty-five hundred dollars less than he went in with, but with the mortgage against Vance Dalton's little Star L spread in his pocket.

The renegade's eyes raked the street. The town was dozing. A few horses stood at racks. A block up the street was a sun-blasted building with the words, "Blue Lantern Drink Emporium," sprawled across its false front.

Curley left the roan standing with untied reins at the rack before the Blue Lantern. He paused just inside the batwing doors.

His tawny eyes probed about the room. Two or three cowboys stood at the bar, downing the whiskey the one-eyed bartender shoved out. A three-handed stud game was going at a table.

At another table in a far corner sat Apache Breck and Gabe Horn, conversing in low tones.

Their eyes fastened on Curley Brand as he came through the doorway, watched as he stalked with a slight limp across the room toward them. Curley eyed the two with a cool, calculating stare.

"Dalton couldn't make it," he said. "He sent me to explain this deal to you gents."

Gabe Horn's fat-rimmed little eyes narrowed. He said, "Hombre, this looks fishy as hell, if yuh ask me. What's yore game?"

Curley seemed pained. "I was aimin' to explain it. But Dalton wouldn't want it made public. Ain't there no place we can go and talk?"

Horn started to say something, but Breck silenced him with a quick gesture. "Back here," he said, and started toward a closed door that obviously opened into a back room.

But Curley went to the bar. He ordered a bottle of whiskey and three glasses. He

poured one of the glasses brimful, downed it at a quick draught. Then he filled the glass again, placed it on the bar.

"Leave it there," he told the one-eyed bartender curtly, "till I come back for it!"

HE turned, carrying the whiskey bottle and two glasses, and followed Gabe Horn and Apache Breck into the back room.

A rickety table and several chairs were all the room contained. The three remained standing, with the table between Curley Brand and the two hard-eyed cattlemen.

"Is this private enough?" Horn sneered. "You better start talkin', hombre—an' be damn shore yuh talk straight and fast!"

Cruel cunning shone from Apache Breck's black eyes. He said softly: "Dalton didn't send you here!"

With a steady hand Curley Brand filled the two glasses from the whiskey bottle. He lifted the glasses, one in each hand, and faced the two land-hogs on widespread legs. His eyes were frosty, sinister. A mocking, ragged grin twisted his features.

"May the dead rest easy!" he said sardonically.

With a quick movement he flung the fiery liquid full into the faces of Gabe Horn and Apache Breck.

Curved fingers slapped over gun-butts. The little back room exploded suddenly in a cyclonic burst of blasting, flaming guns. Gunsmoke, ripped by scarlet, lead-fanged fire, fogged in the room. The old building shook with the deep-throated roll of gun-thunder.

Eyes glared red with hate and fury, only to glaze with fear as a pair of flaming guns roared their red requiem of death.

Of the three men who went into that back room, only one came out.

Curley Brand stood a moment in the open doorway. Ropes of gunsmoke writhed snakishly about his lanky figure. Those in the barroom could see two stark, still bodies sprawled on the floor behind him.

The tall renegade stalked to the bar. He lifted the glass that was still on the bar, downed the whiskey in it, placed a ten-dollar bill on the bar beside the empty glass.

"Drinks for the house!" he ordered.

He turned and strode to the door, went into the street.

No man tried to stop him. Every man stalked to the bar, drank silently on Curley Brand—for every man there hated Breck and Horn, would have been proud to shake hands with the man who had killed them in a fair fight.

Curley Brand rode slowly eastward, toward the blue Mogollons that bristled jaggedly along the far horizon. He never looked back. But his tawny eyes were not so somber, his heart not so bitter.

He had owned a blood debt. Now that debt was paid.

**Short Western Stories Coming, by—**

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***All in the Next Issue*** ***Out June 28th!***

By Cliff Farrell
*(Author of "Chains for a Cowman," etc.)*

# COWMAN

**A two-fisted, red-blooded cowman, old Dave Tracy had always fought fair—whether against sheep or renegades. When he died he willed to his son that man-code of honesty and fair play—a legacy which was to mark Reeve Tracy with the burning brand of traitor and send him out, a pariah from his kind, to face death from the guns of his one-time friends.**

CASS MACDONALD knew his cause was hopeless, yet the big sheepman went on to the end of his story with the grim tenacity that was the keynote of his character.

"And that's the way it is," he told the men of the Combabi Basin Cattle pool, with a weary gesture of a big, powerful hand. "If I can water ten thousand head on Moqui Creek until the drought ends, I'll pull through. I can pay. You can spare the water. That I know. The creek runs more than you use."

His voice died. He did not sit down.

# RENEGADE

## Novelette of Fighting Ranchers

He stood there like a cornered buffalo bull, his heavy shoulders hunched and his craggy face set defiantly, awaiting the refusal that he knew was coming.

This meeting was being held in a Cochise bar-room. The tie rails in the street were racked solid with horses and rigs, for all the basin had gathered this day to behold the humiliation of old Cass MacDonald — Devil MacDonald, they called him here in Combabi Basin.

His bleak eyes roved challengingly around the circle, singling out his old enemies. Marsh Duvall was growing gray too, and the knowledge of his triumph rode deep in his flinty eyes. And there were Mel Rasmussen and Darby Clark, next to Marsh Duvall the biggest cattlemen in the basin. Time had only tooled their animosity to a fine edge.

Every ranch in the pool was represented. The small fry were there in force, taking their cue from these three leaders. They were all present, these cowmen Cass MacDonald had hated and fought for thirty years.

No, not all. MacDonald missed the one opponent who had stood head and shoulders above all others. The lined, leathery face of Dave Tracy would ap-

pear no more in this circle of hostile countenances. Dave Tracy had not lived to witness this humiliation of his old foe. Dave Tracy was dead these five years.

And strangely Cass MacDonald regretted it. In spite of the blood feud he had born against Dave Tracy, he now wished this absent one could be here. Dave Tracy had earned this triumph, sorry as it was. These others, Duvall, Rasmussen, Clark, had never fought toe to toe, gun to gun, eye to eye as had Dave Tracy. But Tracy was dead, and lesser men were to reap the benefit.

Cass MacDonald faced ruin. His gaze shifted to a window and fixed on the distant rim of the Combabis. Here in the basin, with the town of Cochise as the hub, lay rich cow-country, fed by the inexhaustible underground sources from the east slope of that high, rocky range. Moqui Creek and pup streams still ran more than the needs of the cow.

Beyond the Combabi rim was sheep country—and aridity. For five years the creeks and water level in Cass MacDonald's range had been dwindling and vanishing. The ceaseless south winds from the desert and Mexico seemed to have sapped the very subterranean resources on that slope.

There was surplus water here in the basin to tide his flocks over. This drought could not last forever. Another season, perhaps, might see the end of it. But that would be too late.

These cowmen would not sell water to him. His sheep would go, his ranch would go. Some day when the streams and wells flowed again on the west slope, cattle would have his grass as their own, because it was normally the best winter range in New Mexico. Duvall, Rasmussen and Clark would have it, and it would make them wealthy, more powerful than ever.

That rankled. Yet he did not regret his coming, nor even the cost to his pride. He had come in a last effort to save his sheep.

MARSH DUVALL, the chairman, leaned back and chewed the long black stogie that always was unlighted in his stern, thin lips. He was tall, with a bony ascetic face. He had the arrogance and austerity that aroused the respect of lesser men.

"So you're short of water, MacDonald," he said blandly. "Now, that is a shame."

Mel Rasmussen, pudgy, bald and vindictive, cleared his throat. "Ever try drillin' for new water, MacDonald? Maybe if yuh sunk a well on that bench below Bald Peak you might hit it—provided you didn't snub your drill on the skulls of some cowmen that are buried there. Remember them cowmen? Twenty years ago, wasn't it, that you an' your sheepwalkers killed 'em there. One of them was my brother."

Ugly animosity reared up in the room. For the first time they had Devil MacDonald where they wanted him. Men stirred and opened their mouths to air old, half-forgotten grudges.

But one voice rang out above the murmur. "The past is dead. Let it stay buried with these bones you talk about."

That silenced them. Heads jerked around in angry surprise. Cass MacDonald stared at the speaker, and recollection stirred. He knew that Dave Tracy had left a son who now operated the old Rolling T in the south end of the basin. This could be no other than Dave Tracy's boy. He had the same square set of shoulder and chin, the same lithe balance on his feet.

Reeve Tracy was twenty-seven now, sun-darkened, steady of countenance, self-reliant. From the mother he had never known came his dark eyes, his thick,

curly hair. From his father had come the ruggedness apparent in his compact body.

Marsh Duvall flushed and frowned. "Set down, Reeve," he snapped peremptorily.

Few men defied Marsh Duvall in Combabi Basin. His D Slash was the biggest spread in the pool. He controlled the bank here in Cochise, was a director in the state cattle association, and had his finger in most financial pies on the range.

And Reeve Tracy had additional reason for heeding the stern leader of the pool. Rilla Duvall, golden-haired daughter of the cattleman, was wearing a diamond ring that Reeve had placed on her finger a month before.

But Reeve remained on his feet. "You can't pay off old grudges with words," he hold them grimly. "Cass MacDonald came here with a business proposition. He spread it out for us without wastin' words. He's entitled to the same kind of answer."

Duvall's face chilled. "What are you driving at?"

"Why kick a man when he's down?" Reeve said bluntly. "Why rake over the past. Let sleeping dogs lie."

Mel Rasmussen came sputtering to his feet. "You're dad wouldn't be carryin' any pack for Cass MacDonald," he yelled. "He went to his grave with a sheepman's bullet in him. He carried it for ten years."

"But he didn't carry any hate to the grave with him," Reeve stated stonily. "My dad and Cass MacDonald had their grass wars, but they lived in peace, finally. They fought each other to a draw, and had sense enough to realize there was range enough for both sheep and cattle—as long as the Combabis stood between 'em."

"Yuh sound like a sheep-walker," Darby Clark spat, rearing his gaunt frame. "That sort of talk don't set well with me, Tracy."

AT that old Cass MacDonald laughed a little, without mirth. He said nothing, yet there was a world of recollection in that laugh. Also irony at the thought of a Tracy ever tolerating the thought of sheep.

"It's time we woke up," Reeve drove on, unmoved by their wrath. "It's time we realized there's room in the world even for sheep."

"Not in this range there ain't," Rasmussen shouted.

Reeve's voice took on an edge. "You had to sell beef at a loss last fall, Mel. You will this year too, and for some time to come, the way it looks. Still, you've got your hate so close to your eyes you want to take over Cass MacDonald's range and put more cattle on it, just to gloat over him."

"This sounds like fightin' talk," Rasmussen warned, his jowels livid. "If you—"

Marsh Duvall banged the gavel. "Wait, Mel," he barked. "Now Tracy, let's get this straight. You act like you favor sellin' the water in the basin to sheep. Is that right?"

Reeve considered his answer. He carried no brief for Cass MacDonald, or for any sheepman. But while he had sat there listening, he had an uneasy, guilty feeling. It had seemed almost sacrilegious to watch a man offer his pride on the altar of necessity. He had sensed Cass MacDonald's torment of spirit, and it was not his idea of fair play to bait a trapped thing.

Now that the issue was put up to him, he made his decision. "Yes," he said thinly. "I do. Why ruin a man because of things that happened years ago?"

Marsh Duvall came to his feet now. "You're talking before you think," he rasped. "Be careful, Tracy."

Reeve stiffened. "You mean nobody

is entitled to an opinion different from your own?" he asked bleakly.

Duvall pointed a damning finger at him. "I mean you're turning against your own neighbors, the freinds of your dead father. Cass MacDonald did his best to grab this basin for sheep. We fought for it. You didn't. Now you prate of helping him."

"You mean my father fought for it," Reeve said, his eyes beginning to crackle. "The rest of yuh stayed out of it until Dave Tracy had backed the sheep out of the basin. Then you stepped in—after the real fightin' was over!"

A dangerous growl ran over the room, and men surged to their feet. Marsh Duvall, white with fury, took a step toward Reeve. But another man moved in ahead of him.

This was Gene Prichard, big, blond and handsome. Thirty years of age, Prichard was range boss of Duvall's D Slash and proud of it. He knew cattle, and boasted that he knew more about women. He had held the state rope-spinning title for years, and but for Reeve Tracy he would have been all around rodeo champion. But he had never topped Reeve at riding and bulldogging.

"You're talking to a man in your own fighting class now, Tracy," he said. "I've got no gray hairs. I'm waitin' for you to back down on that lie you just spouted."

Reeve smiled bleakly. "First, let's get the business of the meeting out of the way," he said. "The important business. I move we vote for MacDonald's offer to buy water."

"Second the motion," Mel Rasmussen grated. "An' then I figure on watchin' Gene wipe up the dust with you, Tracy."

"All in favor of allowin' sheep to use water from Moqui Creek say 'aye,'" Marsh Duvall shouted.

"Aye," said Reeve calmly. There was no other sound.

"All against, say 'no'."

A roar of voices responded.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Outcast!

DUVALL held up his arms for silence. "We'll give you a moment to reconsider your vote, Tracy," he said with biting tolerance. "Remember this: You've lived all your life among cowmen. You are supposed to be a cowman yourself. Think that over, if you still aim to be a cowman as far as the citizens of this town and range are concerned."

Reeve's face had gone stony. "My vote still stands," he said. "You threaten to ostracize me because I do my own thinking? Is that it?"

They did not answer. Reeve looked around contemptuously.

"You're grass-hungry; filled with hate," he told them. "Poisoned by your own greed and too small of bore to forget the mistakes of the past. Listen to this: I'm withdrawing from this pool right now. The Rolling T never belonged in it, anyway. I've got Shadow Creek as my own. None of its water is involved in the pool agreement. I'm offering Cass MacDonald the right to buy water on Shadow Creek until the drought ends."

The silence seemed to thicken until it became a tangible thing. The triumph of Marsh Duvall, Rasmussen and Clark had evaporated. They stared, lips bloodless, eyes inflamed.

They were beaten, and they knew it. Reeve Tracy's Rolling T, which bridged the narrow southern end of the basin, was a power all its own. The remainder of the basin depended on Moqui Creek, but Reeve had Shadow Creek, smaller, but more than adequate for his needs. Shadow Creek ran the entire fifteen-mile

length of his range, then lost itself in a marsh against his north line instead of joining Moqui Creek beyond.

Darby Clark, his big fists knotted, sprang at Reeve. "Yuh—yuh double-crossin' traitor!" he roared, his voice thick.

The room erupted. "Kill the back-stabbin' skunk! Kill 'em both! Dirty sheepers!"

Like a breaking wave, the men of the cattle pool swept upon Reeve and Cass MacDonald. The shaggy sheepman had leaped to Reeve's side, swinging his heavy fists as the maddened cattlemen rolled over them.

Nobody was armed, for it was the rule of the pool that all belts be checked before a meeting. Otherwise men would have been already dying.

Reeve and the sheepman backed to the bar, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, their fists smashing at faces. Then they went down under sheer weight of numbers. Reeve was using boots and fists, for all rules of fair play were waived in this fierce moment. He was fighting for his life, fighting to avert horrible death at the hands of frenzied men.

He could hear MacDonald on the floor, cursing and fighting like a madman. Fists began to find Reeve. Then boots. He was beset by half a dozen men. A stab of agony shot through him as a boot sank into his ribs. A fist smashed his throat, and he gasped for air.

He drove up with his right, flattened the nose of a whiskered cowman, who fell limply back. But another took his place.

Reeve was weakening. The scene began to blur and spin. But he founght on mechanically, seeking to rise from the floor.

He was at his last gasp, when a thunderclap concussion brought a halt. A voice came from far, far away to Reeve's dazed ears.

"Stop it! Stop it! Let my father alone, or I'll fire the next shells right into you. Oh, you awful cowards! A dozen against one! You yellow beasts! You filthy snakes! Get away from him I say. Do you hear?"

A girl's voice. But Reeve had never heard it before. There was a chill, tiger-ish timbre to her warning. It paralyzed the battle. Reeve's opponents stood up, then moved away, flinching and staring at something behind them as though they feared blasting death.

Reeve forced himself to his knees, then to his feet. Cass MacDonald also staggered erect. They were bloody, and not all of it was their own. Their shirts were ripped to the skin.

REEVE stared. In the door stood a slender, small figure, a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun leveled. Smoke rolled against the ceiling, and there was a gaping gouge in a beam where a double-load of buckshot had blasted. Empty shells lay between the girl's boots, showing that she had reloaded.

Her worn, corduroy riding skirt swept down over curving hips to the beaded tops of boots that had seen much saddle service. She was panting, her breast lifting and falling beneath her white soft shirt which was open at the throat. Her skin was softly tanned, and against it her eyes stood out gray and smoky. She had no hat, and the hot wind from the street stirred her hair, flashing its rich amber.

She was a stranger to Reeve. She returned his stare with a quick glance of surprise.

Cass MacDonald spoke, grimly proud. "I'll take that gun, Faith. Tracy, this is my daughter. I have no sons."

"Come on, Dad," Faith MacDonald said huskily. "I knew it was a mistake to come

to Cochise. What else did you expect from these—these—"

Her scorching glance was epithet enough. Her father glanced around, and his expression grew sardonic.

"Maybe we got what we came for," he said. "Or have you changed your mind, Tracy?"

Reeve turned and gave his answer to Marsh Duvall. "My offer still stands," he said.

"Tracy," Marsh Duvall barked hoarsely. "I'm ashamed that my daughter ever made a promise to a man like you. She'll be more ashamed when she hears about this. She's through with you. Do you understand?"

"Rilla loves me," Reeve said grimly. "She'll stand by me, because I'm doing the right thing. Some day you'll admit it yourself—after you've forgot your greed and your grudge."

"And you're through in Cochise," Duvall went on, as though pronouncing Jovian judgment. "This is a cow-town. You've thrown in with sheep. Live with them from now on."

"Yeah," Mel Rasmussen added. "We'll let you go out alive now. But don't come back."

Reeve laughed mirthlessly. "When I come back I'll be packing the irons that will even up the odds," he promised bleakly. "Twelve bullets are as good as twelve men."

Cass MacDonald waited at the door with the shotgun, now lowered.

Reeve singled out Gene Prichard. "You passed the lie to me awhile ago, Gene," he said. "We'll have more room out in the road. Let's go."

Gene Prichard always had toted a secret ambition to take on Reeve with fists. Prichard believed he could thereby remove the sting from what Reeve had done to him in the rodeo arena.

HE WENT out willingly, and the men of the Combabi pool surged with him. Prichard stripped off his green silk shirt, handed his hat to Marsh Duvall, and grinned.

"You won't want to come back to Cochise after this, Tracy," he predicted.

Reeve tossed his hat in the dust. Cass MacDonald picked it up, and worked its brim around nervously with his thick fingers as he watched the fight. Faith MacDonald had moved away. She mounted a horse farther on, and tried to keep her eyes away. But soon she was standing in the stirrups to look over the heads of the crowd. Her little hands were clenched, her eyes bright.

Prichard had the edge in height and reach. He looked heavier, but Reeve's compact build was deceptive. He matched Prichard pound for pound.

But Reeve's arms, after the battering in the saloon, seemed heavy as he lifted them. Prichard rushed him like a tornado. He stood and mixed. A right staggered him, a left clipped his jaw.

He hooked a punch to Prichard's body, and the handsome range boss backed away, gasping and blinking. That first punishment seemed to bring Reeve back to normal. He met Prichard's next rush midway and knocked the blond man down with a clean swing to the jaw. Prichard rolled and squirmed away, fear in his eyes, for some opponents would have piled into him with boots.

But Reeve waited until Prichard was steady on his feet, then he exploded all over the taller man. Prichard fought desperately, futilely against that fierce attack. Then he went down. He did not get up. He was bloody, battered, whipped.

Reeve turned and walked away, the crowd parting sullenly. Cass MacDonald handed him his hat.

"Thanks," Reeve said briefly. "You can start your sheep through Butterfield

Pass anytime you're of a mind. I'll sweep my brand off the benches below the pass tomorrow morning. My water price is half a cent a head, if you keep 'em moving so they don't ruin the feed. Ten cents a head otherwise."

"Agreed," MacDonald said in his deep voice. "Do you want it on paper?"

"No," Reeve declared. "No, I don't need it on paper."

"Dave Tracy's word was always good with me also," MacDonald remarked. "And you act like him. You fight like him."

"I hope so," Reeve said moodily. "One thing I want made clear. Those woolies go back to your own range the day there's enough water to keep 'em alive. Combabi Basin is cow country. I aim to keep it that."

"There was a day when I wanted this basin," the sheepman admitted. "I fought for it. I lost it, and Dave Tracy was the one that won it—for cattle. I don't want it now. I only want to save my sheep. It's tough to watch 'em die of thirst."

Reeve nodded, and headed for the livery where he had put up his horse. But he stopped dead in his tracks, then crossed the dusty street to confront Marsh Duvall, and a tall, willowy girl who wore polished riding boots, whipcord breeches, a silk waist, and a gay neckerchief. A pert, little hat was cocked on her golden hair.

"Howdy, Rilla," Reeve said.

Rilla Duvall was beautiful; her features chiseled to an even cameo quality. She had been schooled in the East, and she carried her chin high. She was proud that she was a Duvall, proud of her father, proud of herself.

She looked at Reeve, then, her blue eyes icy, she looked through him. It was as if she never knew that he existed. Then, she held out her hand, and Reeve saw a diamond ring in it.

"Father told me about it," she said, no tremor of regret in her voice. "You can blame only yourself."

She passed on with her father. Reeve stood there a moment looking at the ring in his palm. Then he flipped it into the dust and went to the livery.

WHEN Reeve came riding out, Cass MacDonald and his daughter were mounting and waiting. Reeve had forgotten them. Nothing else that day had stung him like this last blow. He had built his hopes and plans mountain-high, and Rilla Duvall was the one who always had sat on those dream mountains.

Reeve frowned, but Cass MacDonald said: "Our trails run the same way for a dozen miles. I've still got the shotgun. You're not armed."

Reeve knew they had seen the episode of the diamond ring. All Cochise had seen it. It did not matter. Nothing mattered. It did not even matter to Reeve now whether he ever came back to Cochise again. The incentive was gone.

They covered five miles of south trail before Reeve pulled himself from his black mood.

He turned to Faith MacDonald. She had said no word during their ride. "I'm sorry," he told her. "Sorry for not thanking you sooner. If it hadn't been for you, the herd would have tramped me under."

"I did it to save my father," she told him, without rancor, without warmth. It was merely a statement of fact.

This girl was from sheep country. Distrust and fear of cattlemen were part of her birthright.

It seemed strange to Reeve that a sheep girl should have such soft music in her voice. He looked closer at her, marking her trim, lithe ease in the saddle. He marveled at her smallness, and her vibrant youth.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Reeve Strikes Back

AND so sheep came into Combabi Basin. They came in a dusty rolling flood through Butterfield Pass which Dave Tracy and his fighting punchers had held against them twenty years before in bloody battle.

They coursed down the benches to Shadow Creek where they spent a day on water, then moved out again to make room for more thirsty hordes. In an endless gray chain the flocks came and went as Cass MacDonald rationed the scant supply remaining on his own range and that he was buying from Reeve against the needs of his thirty thousand head.

In this way he carried his sheep through the hot summer with little loss. Cass MacDonald was saved, for the end of this cycle of drought was written in the sky. The coming of a few, brief rains in late August, presaged a wet fall and a winter that would pile the snow deep in the Combabi rims. Winter snow in the mountains meant running streams in summer.

But Reeve Tracy and his Rolling T paid the price. First the bank in Cochise, controlled by Marsh Duvall, called in a note it was carrying against the Rolling T. Reeve was forced to sacrifice the pick of his beef in an off-market to meet the note.

Then Darby Clark, whose Diamond Dot adjoined the Rolling T, attacked Reeve's title to a strip of range on his north line. It was merely a suit of harassment, but it forced Reeve to trace his title through a mass of land grants and old surveys. That, and the court costs ran into money. He managed to borrow this from a bank in Greendale, the sheep town forty miles over the Combabi Rim, where Cass MacDonald's word was good.

Stores in Cochise refused his business, and he was forced to wagon in his supplies from Greendale also.

His fences were cut and Rolling T steers that drifted never came back alive. He and his riders found their carcasses with bullet holes in them.

There was balm in one thing. The three men whose esteem he valued most, stayed with him. These were ranty old Jim McAleer, Carney Evans and Dusty Williams, who rated themselves as cowpunchers. They were more than that. They had been with the Rolling T for years. It was Jim McAleer who came into the Combabi stirrup to stirrup with Reeve's father when the brand was established.

"I don't cotton to sheep; never did, never will," Jim McAleer said when Reeve first informed the crew of the water deal. "But I'm stickin'. Maybe it's because I figure you'll need some help before this is over."

Carney Evans and Dusty stayed, too. Two more punchers, who were natives of the basin, cut their string, and threw in with the pool. Occasional saddle tramps drifted through, but none stayed long. Someone always whispered in their ears that Rolling T money was unhealthy.

Reeve and his aging trio of riders ran the roundup with such meager help they got from tumbleweeding riders. Then the pool closed the Cochise trail to his beef cut, and he was forced to drive Butterfield Pass to Greendale. It was a dry march, and the stock shipped below standard, bringing no profit.

Man-to-man fighting with guns or fists Reeve could have endured. This shadowy, financial warfare ground his nerves. He rode into Cochise one day, braced with two six-guns. No business man or bartender refused him that day. No man from the pool came to challenge his right to walk the street.

But neither did he hear a friendly word. They avoided him as a plague. His victory was a hollow one.

Later, he heard that Rilla Duvall was engaged to Gene Prichard. The thought of it lingered in his mind no longer than ordinary range news. Thus was he brought to realize that what he had thought was love, had been only fascination.

ONE day Reeve stalked and trapped one of Darby Clark's furtive riders as he cut a Rolling T fence.

Reeve cornered the man in a little draw, and did not even deign to draw his gun. "Pile down, Joe," he said tersely. "I'm going to send you back to the pool as my first answer to what they're doing to me. Tell 'em the next one I catch goes back dead."

The puncher fought with desperation, but Reeve rolled over him like a stampede. Reeve finally boosted his battered form into a saddle, and headed him for his home ranch.

When Reeve turned to mount his own horse, he started and his hand instinctively flicked to his holster. A rider had come up unnoticed while he was working on the puncher. Then he relaxed and smiled a little.

The rider was Faith MacDonald. He had not seen her since that day in Cochise. It occurred to him now that she was no mere, young girl. She wore jeans, guarded by old steerhide chaps. She was a young woman of grace and poise, and certainly easy to look at. Yet she was not beautiful as Rilla Duvall was beautiful.

"I was hoping I might run into a loafer that has been killing lambs," she said, tapping a carbine in the saddle boot. "I saw you circling that rider, and came down."

"You — hunting wolves?" Reeve grinned. "You ought to be in a kitchen making pies. That's my opinion."

"The wolves bother you, too, don't they?" she mused, watching the battered rider dwindle in the distance. "I'm sorry. So is dad. It's our fault."

"You think I did the wrong thing?" he asked.

"From your viewpoint, yes. They will ruin you."

"They might ruin my ranch. They won't ruin *me*. There are some things I value more than the ranch."

She studied him gravely. He fancied there was approval deep in her eyes. Suddenly, he felt soothed as though some of his troubles of the past weeks had been equalized by reward.

Color mounted to her cheeks, and she looked away. Then she smiled. "I don't hunt wolves all the time," she told him. "I can make pies. I may bring one the next time I ride this way."

She rode away. She waved before she finally disappeared. He knew she was heading to the sheep camp her father had established on the Rolling T benches below Butterfield Pass. There she would stay for the night. Reeve found himself thinking of her nearness as he ate with the grizzled buckaroos that evening at his own spread.

The next day a deputy sheriff appeared with a warrant for Reeve's arrest on an assault and battery charge. The Diamond Dot puncher had filed it. Reeve tore up the warrant, and pointed out the trail to Cochise.

"I'm not going to trial in that town on any charge, much less a pee-wee thing like this," he said. "Go back and tell Marsh Duvall that!"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Breed of the Wolf

OLD Jim McAleer, lank and stiff-kneed, came in after dark, clanked

his spur chains into the chuckshed where Reeve, Carney Evans, Dusty Williams, and a new rider named Bucksaw, were eating.

Jim tugged his drooping mustache, then said casually: "Darby Clark is buildin' up his crew. Got some new hands. Saw five of 'em today, pokin' along our line fence. They ride together."

Reeve looked up. "Gun-slingers?" he asked slowly.

Jim nodded. "I reckon. I figured it would come to this sooner or later. It always does."

Reeve sat there a moment, staring into distance. "Well?" he finally said, looking at them.

"Well, what the hell?" Carney Evans, short and paunchy retorted. "Pass me them biscuits, Dusty."

"I will not," said Dusty Williams. "If this is goin' to be my last meal I want my share."

Reeve grinned, trying to think of something that wouldn't sound too sentimental. "You three—" he began. "Oh, hell—nothing I could say would change your minds, anyway. But Bucksaw, you're new. This isn't your fight. You can cut your string, and no hard feelings."

"I been treated all right here," Bucksaw remarked. "I like this outfit. I'm not gun-shy."

That night a bench reserved for winter feed was fired and burned off. One of Cass MacDonald's flocks on Shadow Creek was raided, a herder killed, and the sheep stampeded into a coulee.

At dawn MacDonald rode into the Rolling T for pow-wow. With him were two hard-bitten sheepmen, .30-30's slung beneath *rosaderos,* six-guns whanged down.

"I'll have two more fightin' men here, come noon," MacDonald said. "That's all I can muster in a hurry. I've had no need of 'em for years."

With him was his daughter. Her father and Reeve tried to frown her away from the war council, but she would not take the hint. She stood in the background, listening. "The pool has turned loose its wolf," MacDonald stated. "They're hirin' guns. Plenty of 'em. They aim to wipe us out."

"Jim saw five gun-riders yesterday," Reeve nodded. "But five isn't so many."

MacDonald snorted. "There's plenty more than that. My herders have spotted two bunches of strangers driftin' through in the last two days. Three at one time; five another. Some was Mex, but packin' plenty of iron. An' tracks of still another bunch of six was picked up a couple days ago."

Reeve and his riders glanced grimly at each other.

"No Mex in the bunch you saw, was there, Jim?" Reeve asked.

"No," McAleer said, frowning. "Which way was they headin', Cass?"

"North—toward Cochise."

"That means they come up from the Border. I didn't figure even Marsh Duvall was low enough to import renegades to stomp us out."

"It means we've got to find some fighting men for our side," MacDonald said bleakly.

"No," Reeve stated tersely. "I hire no gun help. These may be drifters just passin' through. That's the old outlaw trace through the Combabis, you know. I don't figure the pool as going in so deep financially until they see the strength of our play."

"You're gamblin'," MacDonald warned him. "If they are pool guns, you'll be wiped out before you can build up bullet power enough to check it to 'em."

Faith MacDonald spoke up. "There's one way of avoiding this—this bloodshed," she put in tensely.

They looked at her, and her gaze went to her father. "They'll leave the Rolling

T alone if—if we pull out," she said in a low voice.

Cass MacDonald stared at the ground. "That's the truth," he finally said heavily. "I would have lost my range, anyway, if you hadn't stepped in to help me, Tracy. I don't figure to let you go under because of that. They can have my ranch. That ought to satisfy 'em."

REEVE rose from his heel-squat, flushed and angry. "That's the end of talk like that," he said flatly. "Do you think I could ever live with myself if I went for a deal like that? Now let's get down to business. We've got to ride night guard. We'll clamp on some of these gunmen sooner or later. Rub out a few, and they'll lose their ambition. That kind always do. Now . . ."

And the men talked and planned, and drew maps in the dust with their fingers.

Faith MacDonald watched them a while. Her eyes were somber and troubled, for this was war talk, and war always meant death for men and grief for women. Then she moved away, mounted her horse and headed west as though for the home ranch.

But once out of sight, she swung north. Soon she was on the Cochise trail. She hoped to find Marsh Duvall in town, or at least Rasmussen or Darby Clark.

Faith meant to make a deal with them. She proposed to offer them her father's sheep domain, and the price was to be peace for Reeve Tracy and the Rolling T. Faith knew that her father would accede. The price Reeve was paying already weighed heavily on the sheepman, who had a stern code of honor.

"Father will die, Reeve Tracy will die, and—and then I wouldn't want to live either," she spoke aloud as she pushed her horse over the hot miles.

Thus, she fully realized for the first time that she loved Reeve Tracy. The acknowledgment had come unbidden from her heart, but now that it was voiced, she knew its vast truth.

It was mid-afternoon when she rode into Cochise. It did not occur to her that she was famous in this town since the episode of the shotgun. Unmindful of stares, she headed for the bank, because there she knew she would find Marsh Duvall if he was in town.

When half a block away she saw him. Duvall and his daughter appeared and mounted two flashy California sorrels with cream-colored manes and tails. Gene Prichard, on a big black horse, joined them, and Rilla Duvall smiled at him.

Faith's lips tightened at the thought of making her plea in the presence of the golden-haired girl. But she touched her mount to intercept them. She was going through with it.

Then all her plans went overboard, swirled away into oblivion.

The chatter of galloping hoofs came to her. She stared. Riders were sweeping into Cochise from both ends of the street. They were deep in the saddle, their horses stretched out. She saw dark, savage faces beneath big rolling brims of *jipi* sombreros, and equally savage, whiskered jowls under weather-limp Stetsons. Guns were in their hands.

Rosy stabs of flame winked. Bullets whined by. Window glass crashed. She heard townsmen yelling, their voices shrill with incredulous horror. And women's thin screams. But all these were undertones to the roll of hoofs and the smash of gunfire.

The gun-riders came from the four points of the compass on their foaming horses. In a twinkling it seemed they flooded the street. Here and there lay lifeless bodies of citizens of Combabi.

"God!" an appalled voice came to Faith. "A raid! A raid! Red Kirby and his renegades. God help us!"

Faith had heard of Red Kirby. Who had not, in this untamed territory? Red Kirby, outlaw, revolutionist, soldier of the devil, had raided from Mexico before with his hybrid crew. But never this far north, and never in such force.

Faith sat there as in a nightmare. They were around her already. "Here's a peach," a snarling voice said. "Grab her."

Hands gripped her, dragged her down. She saw Rilla Duvall being pulled from her horse also. Marsh Duvall went for his gun, but a muzzle crashed on his skull, and he sagged from the saddle. Gene Prichard's hands went into the air, a six-shooter jammed in his back, a shining knife at his throat.

She heard other women screaming hysterically, then a commanding voice: "That's plenty. Don't bother with any more. Take 'em to the plaza."

Faith was pushed into a dazed group of women prisoners.

Then the voice lifted stridently, and carried far. "We've got half a dozen women here. They won't be harmed if you fools keep your heads. It's money we want. We're taking over the town. Start shooting and this street will run in blood. This is Red Kirby talking!"

FAITH saw a shaggy, long-eared chunk of evil—Red Kirby. His jaws, matted with half a month's growth of jungly red whiskers, were plow-like wedges that came to a long, cleft chin. His nose was flat, and dented at the end with a bullet scar. His eyes hot coals, fanned by greed and triumph.

Here were the mysterious drifters the sheep herders had seen moving north. Not gunmen, imported by the cattle pool, but renegades making rendezvous for this raid.

Renegades? No, wolves! Marsh and the cattle pool had turned the wolf loose in this range, forgetting the law of nature that wolves attract wolves. Wolves had come up at their backs, stalking them while they stalked their own quarry. And these wolves were the worst the West had produced. They answered to no law of God or man, to no dictate of conscience.

Red Kirby had planned this raid for weeks; timed it with cunning. Word of trouble in Combabi Basin had reached him below the Border. He knew that men engaged in one war are easy to surprise by an invader. A year had passed since his last raid, and he and his followers were in need of money and loot. He had sent scouts to Cochise, then drifted his forces up in small groups.

Cochise was helpless. There were twenty-five renegades holding the town, but they seemed to number a hundred. The telegraph office in the depot had been taken over by two bandits at the outset. The railway wire was Cochise's only link with the world, and now an invader who had once been an operator sat beside the instrument and saw that no warning went out.

The women hostages were held in the little plaza. Rilla Duvall was sobbing. Faith was pale and cold with the dread of things worse than death. But she tried to soothe a buxom, dark-haired woman and her seventeen-year-old daughter who were among the prisoners. These were Mel Rasmussen's wife, twenty years younger than he, and his only child. But Faith did not know who they were.

She knew the other two prisoners. One was the wife of a young pool rancher whose little spread lay north of town. The other, elderly and frail, was the wife of the minister in Cochise.

With the lives of these women at stake, the town offered no resistance.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Attack!

THE town was sacked. The raiders looted the bank, cleaned out the tills and safes of every store and bar-room. They outfitted themselves with guns, shells, clothes and took all valuables that would pack easily.

A puncher thought he saw a chance to slip away and ride to the ranches for help, but he did not get far. Kirby had ringed the town with half a dozen riflemen. Except for the scant juniper on the flat around town there was no cover. The puncher died with three bullets in his body.

It was dusk when Kirby gave the word to ride. They slugged the telegraph operator and wrecked the instrument. Fresh horses were saddled. They took the pick of the mounts in town, and ran the remainder into the flats.

Kirby came and looked over the hostages. "Leave that one," he said, indicating the minister's wife. "She never sat a horse in her life, by her looks. Take the others."

Then Kirby lifted his voice again so that the town could hear. "We're takin' a few of the women folks with us," he announced. "That's so you won't be too ambitious at followin' us. We'll turn 'em loose when the sign is right."

They jangled out of town. They cut wire from the telegraph line for half a mile south, then headed toward the Combabis in darkness.

Red Kirby laughed aloud. "That was easy," he said. "We'll be half way home before they get started. They won't even sight our dust."

He looked back at the hostages. "Two beauties," he remarked. "Maybe we won't let all of 'em go at the Border."

The five women rode in file, their horses lined to outlaw saddles with picket ropes. Faith was in the center of the group. Rilla Duvall drooped listlessly on the horse next ahead.

They delved deep into the Combabis, a clattering column of success-mad men and despairing women.

Faith knew these mountains, for she had explored them since childhood. Familiar peaks were always landmarks against the starline, informing her of their progress southward. She discovered from the frequent slowing of the pace and casting about for the trail that she knew this region better than did the renegades.

All this time she had been swept along by the unbelievable swirl of events. Now one thing stood out. Someone must escape and bring help.

She knew they were following the old, dim outlaw trail southward. It would soon cross Butterfield Pass, and her thoughts swung to the sheep camp on the Rolling T benches below the pass.

At intervals, in stretches of deepest darkness, she bent forward and worked at the knot on the lead rope. The dry rawhide resisted. Her fingertips became raw and bleeding. After a long time she succeeded. The knot hung loosely in the ring now. A jerk would free it.

She waited her chance, nerves thrumming in her taut body. It did not come for an hour. Then, when they were not a mile from where the trace descended to cross the pass, she gathered herself.

They were side-hilling a soaring mountainside, and not far below was the blank gloom of an arroyo, choked with mesquite, pear and catclaw. Faith knew of a game and cattle trail through that phalanx of brush. Once she had trailed a deer through it.

The outlaws were relaxed, saddle-weary. She bent forward, slipped the rope free, sank the spurs home. The horse leaped, and she whirled it downhill,

brushing past a flanking outlaw, before he could move.

Sharp, explosive curses flamed along the line. Horses leaped into activity.

"Don't shoot," Red Kirby barked. "It might be heard. Ride her down. Damn her soul! Damn you fools for goin' to sleep!"

FAITH hurled her horse downward, leaning back to hold it up on the slant. She could hear them plunging in pursuit. Came the startled cry of a man, and the crash of a falling mount. Bitter oaths, darkness, sliding hoofs—all this in dizzy melange.

The thicket loomed up abruptly, its black wall a welcome background. She veered her horse to the right, peering frenziedly for the vague opening. A sob came from her after a minute, for she believed she had missed it.

They were gaining. Then she saw a deeper shadow, and whirled the horse into it. It led on and on into the jungly thicket. This was the game trail.

The pursuing riders swept by. She hooked the horse deeper. She brushed pear in the darkness, and the thin spines festooned her clothes, piercing her flesh.

But she had evaded them. She knew these hills and they did not. They soon realized she had entered the thicket, and rode to surround it. But that took time, and Faith was out of it on the opposite side, and pushing her horse up a coulee eastward. She had escaped!

An hour later she galloped into her father's sheep camp on the bench.

Dark figures gathered in from the shadows beyond the faint glow of the campfire embers. With a glad cry she saw her father, Reeve Tracy, Jim McAleer and others of the fighting crew. She had arrived at a fortunate time, for they had just made this midnight rendezvous after patroling the range for pool gunmen.

"Faith!" her father exclaimed. "I thought you were—"

"A raid!" she said breathlessly. "Red Kirby and his bunch raided Cochise this afternoon. They're heading down the old outlaw trail to the Border. They've got town women with 'em to hold off pursuit."

Hurriedly she explained the details. The story of her escape brought a proud gleam to her father's eyes.

"And Rilla Duvall is one of the prisoners," she concluded, and could not help looking at Reeve.

Reeve had stood listening intently, hands on hips. Now he turned to his horse.

"Come on," he said tersely. "We've got to head 'em off."

Jim McAleer spat bitterly into the fire. "They laid themselves open to a raid. Now we have to eat lead to help them out of this hole."

"Kirby's stealing women," Reeve pointed out grimly. "We don't fight women. It's up to us. We're the only ones who have a ghost of a show of stopping them."

Cass MacDonald already was dragging cinch. "It'll be tough," he declared. "Twenty-five of 'em, eh, Faith? An' we got eight."

"I wish Carney was here," Dusty Williams muttered, as he mounted. "We could use him."

Carney Evans and Bucksaw had been left at the Rolling T to guard against a possible raid by pool gunmen. But evidently the gunmen were not riding tonight.

Faith mounted, too. Reeve hipped around and frowned at her. "You stay here," he said sharply.

Her chin lifted defiantly. Her father eyed her moodily. "Maybe we better let her tag along," MacDonald said reluctant-

ly. "I got a hunch we'll need her. We've got to do this careful, because of the women. We can't sling much lead if Kirby hides behind petticoats."

"You've got a plan?" Reeve asked.

"Y-yeah!"

Reeve said no more. But he was troubled. He sided Faith as they started. "One thing you didn't make clear," he remarked. "Why did you go to Cochise?"

"That doesn't matter," she told him.

Reeve had guessed the correct answer however.

They rode on in silence. Faith found both joy and pain in that ride. Now that she admitted her love for Reeve, his nearness aroused tremulous ecstasy in her heart. Yet she believed his thoughts were on Rilla Duvall. He was riding to save another woman.

"We'll ramble," Reeve said, setting the pace. "Can't do anything until daylight anyway. We'll cut into the trace south of here."

They all knew the old outlaw trace. They paralleled it at a relentless gallop southward, until dawn lifted its first gray pallor on the horizon. Then Reeve and MacDonald scouted from a higher ridge.

HALF an hour of waiting, and they saw their quarry. The renegades came into sight two miles away, winding down from a rim. A flash of color marked the prisoners.

"Your plan?" Reeve asked tersely.

Cass MacDonald's rugged face seemed suddenly haggard. He turned and beckoned Faith, who had waited below the ridge with their pathetically meager crew of fighting men.

She came riding up and sat quietly near.

"I think I savvy your idea," Reeve grated. "She's not in on anything that means risk. Understand me, Cass?"

"There's only one way," the sheepman said hoarsely. "We've got to get word to the women. If they're ready to duck when we open up, they might be able to make cover while we slash Kirby's bunch with our lead. Otherwise they'll be used as shields, and we'll be helpless."

Reeve knew all this. He had thought of nothing else since the start. "How can we get word to them?" he asked quietly.

"Faith. She can let herself be recaptured. Kirby will think she only lost her way after escaping last night. She can pass the word to the women to be ready. We'll circle ahead and ambush 'em. I've got the spot in mind."

"No," Reeve rasped grimly. "No, by God! It's only one chance in a hundred at best."

Faith spoke: "It's the only way. We've got to try it. Rilla Duval is there. Remember that."

Reeve whirled on her fiercely. "To hell with Rilla Duvall!" he spat. "It's you I'm thinking about. You!"

Amazingly, the weariness dropped from Faith, sudden animation returning to her face. She laughed aloud, a short, clear ripple that seemed suddenly care-free.

She kissed her father. "I'm going," she said. "Nothing can stop me. Where will you be, Dad?"

The agony of this sacrifice was written in Cass MacDonald's eyes. But he did not weaken. "About three miles farther on they'll hit through a little canyon, with a rock wall on the left, a big limestone slide on the right. We'll be in the limestone. We'll cut down all the riders around the women when we open up. You haze 'em to cover, and stay there. We'll keep the cusses away from you after that."

She looked at Reeve. Irresistibly they were drawn together. He reached from the saddle, drew her to him and kissed her.

"May God ride with you, Faith," Reeve said huskily. "I love you."

"And I love you," she whispered. "Always. Forever!"

Then she rode away. Two agonized men watched her side-hill the ridge away from them. She crossed it beyond sight of the renegades and vanished down a draw that would intercept them below. They waited, knuckles white on rifles, until she reappeared among the wild bunch.

They heard faint, triumphant guffaws. They saw her made prisoner and placed among the other hostages. Thus far the plan worked. . . .

## CHAPTER SIX

### Cowman Courage

THEY crouched among the limestone, rifles in their hands, six-shooters in quick reach at their feet. The racking chatter of tired hoofs was growing louder as the renegades came filing in long, winding line among the boulders that studded the narrow defile.

Cass MacDonald was at Reeve's right, the other six strung out for a hundred yards. Their forces had been too thin to split and hold both sides of the canyon. They must stay together and mass their fire. All had their orders. They knew what to do.

Reeve peered through a slit. He saw Red Kirby ride past in the lead. Kirby had the swagger of a conqueror. Things were going well with him. The one flaw in his scheme, the escape of the little, gray-eyed girl, had been corrected. A few miles ahead was a relay of fresh horses. Another dawn would see them within striking distance of the Border.

Reeve let Kirby ride on. Others trotted by. Then came the women. Reeve saw Rilla Duvall, wan, exhausted, her courage worn thin. Then Faith MacDonald. He could see her pallor, for she knew what was coming in this natural trap. But she was straight in the saddle, poised and tense. Her bravery steeled him.

Death's inning had come. The file of prisoners and their immediate guards were squarely under the rifles of the hidden eight.

Reeve lifted an arm. Leathery cheeks nuzzled gunstocks, eyes notched on targets.

"Now!" Reeve spoke.

Eight guns crashed in unison. There was no mercy in this moment; there could be none with the stake what it was. And death struck like an icy wind, instantly, terribly. Five renegades toppled like wooden men from their saddles.

The echo of that first stunning crash rolled back, and was taken up again by the guns. Three more of Kirby's men went down before they could clear their saddles in the instinctive tumble for cover that started all along the line.

In that first instant Faith MacDonald had acted. With a shrill cry of command she was off her horse. She dragged Mel Rassmussen's wife and daughter down. Rilla Duvall and the other woman already had tumbled off.

Around them was death. The rifles from the limestone had wiped out all outlaws within reach. Fifty feet away was a crevice in bed rock, narrow and only three feet deep. Faith led them to it in a mad race. They dropped into it, and were out of sight, out of the way of bullets only seconds after the attack began.

The outlaws dove behind boulders and were fighting back a moment later. The roll of guns welled up to an angry roar. They fought at first with frenzied desperation. Then, realizing the meager numbers of the opposition, Red Kirby steadied them.

Now bullets whined only when there were targets. Reeve laid down his hot

rifle and picked up a six-shooter, for the range was only a hundred yards on those nearest to him.

As he peered for a target, a bullet grazed his hair. He heard one of the sheepmen curse and shake a hand numbed when a slug raked the barrel of his gun.

Reeve and Cass MacDonald looked at each other, grim elation in their faces. "I figure we can stop a rush, even if they try one," Reeve said. "We can hold 'em here all day."

"By sundown them yaller bellies from Cochise ought to be trailin' 'em this far," the sheepman said. "We've been lucky. Luckier than I ever was in my life."

The sniping went on for ten minutes. They could hear Red Kirby cursing as he tried to organize a rush. But his men had no stomach for it. They were up against fighting men who sank their lead straight and deep. That proof lay there for the seeing—eight dead and wounded comrades in the open, two more behind boulders.

"We've whittled 'em plenty," MacDonald said. "An' we ain't lost a single ma—"

Then Cass MacDonald's bulky body jerked to the tune of a savage twang. He sagged forward against the boulder that covered him. Again his body twitched, and a tiny spurt of dust drifted from the back of his vest.

He slipped to the ground. He was still alive, but two .30-30 slugs had gone through him.

Reeve started toward him, then suddenly dropped flat. The significance of that spurt of dust had come to him. The sheepman had been hit in the back. *In the back!*

DUSTY WILLIAMS, farther on, twisted in agony, then pitched forward on his face. He was dead. And he had been dusted in the back, too.

"Down!" Reeve rasped fiercely. "They're above us. Two of 'em at least. Flatten out. We're under cross-fire!"

Two renegades had been riding rear guard a mile behind the main body. It was these who had come up and taken to the rim above and behind them.

Thus their pat hand had been topped by this unexpected hole card. Reeve lay there an instant, the victim of bitter despair. But only for an instant. He realized that these two must be wiped out if they were to survive.

"Cover me," he gritted. "Burn powder. Keep 'em busy. I'm goin' up to get 'em."

Then he arose, and went up the jumbled slant of broken rock at desperate speed. As he emerged, every gun cut loose on him. Amid a hail of bullets he dove to cover unscathed after a rush of two hundred feet. He emerged again almost instantly, taking advantage of a lull, and made another upward surge before the blast of metal sent him diving to cover again.

The renegades discovered they were paying toll for their effort to down Reeve. Five guns had been harrying them. Another dead man lay among them, and two more were wounded. They took wild, hurried snapshots when Reeve made his next rush.

One bullet found Reeve. His left arm went numb, and he dropped gasping between slabs of rock. There was a round hole squarely through his forearm. He took the six-shooter from that useless hand and thrust it in his belt. But his right arm was still sound.

The two above had been silent, waiting for him to come nearer. Reeve worked his way unseen fifty yards to the right, then made another race. The pair above opened up on him briefly, but missed.

The rim was only a hundred yards away now. Reeve reared up from his hiding place, then sank back instantly

until only his head and gun hand was visible. Both men above reared up like jacks-in-the-box.

They dropped back, realizing the ruse. But one was not quick enough. Reeve had fired. He saw the head of his target jerk grotesquely before it dropped from sight. Then it appeared again at the side of the boulder as the renegade pitched forward in cold death.

Only one to deal with now. Reeve gathered himself. He came out from cover at full speed, bending low, zig-zagging. Metal from below lashed around him, twitching his clothes.

But he was watching only the rock above that shielded the second renegade. Then the head appeared above twin guns that smoked and bellowed.

Reeve fired at the same instant. He felt the shock as a bullet slugged his thigh. His bullet had caught his opponent in the throat.

He cleared the rim and threw himself prone. He was on top now! He set his teeth and ran south. Ten minutes later he appeared on the lip of the rocky, abrupt east rim. He was above the outlaws now, in a position to cross-fire them.

Red Kirby had expected him. He fired at Reeve and Reeve's gun answered. Kirby went down, a slug in his broad chest.

Reeve lifted his voice. "You're through. Drop your guns and walk out one by one."

The survivors knew that he spoke bitter truth. There was no hope of duplicating Reeve's feat. One by one they surrendered.

TOWARD sundown, forty riders appeared, trailing the raiders. Most of the men of Combabi Basin were there, also the five gun-riders the pool had hired to wipe out the Rolling T.

Marsh Duvall was unable to speak when he found his daughter safe and unharmed. Mel Rasmussen wept like a child as his wife and daughter ran to meet him. Gene Prichard was present, too.

They gathered around, a silent group. Dusty Williams' body lay on a flat slab. Jim McAleer squatted at his side.

Nearby a man was dying. Cass MacDonald's tough old body had retained life throughout the day—perhaps because he knew that Marsh Duvall would be here in time.

Marsh Duvall glanced uncertainly at Reeve, then knelt by MacDonald's side. Rilla had told him the whole story.

"There ain't much I can say, Cass," the cowman said brokenly. "Except that things will be different in Combabi Basin from now on. I've hated sheep and sheepmen all my life. I've hated you. You paid me off by givin' your life for my daughter. What can I say?"

Cass MacDonald smiled. "Don't forget that it was a cowman that did most of the fightin'," he breathed. "There's cowmen where I'm goin' that will be glad to hear of peace in this range at last. Dave Tracy is over there."

His eyes turned to Faith who held his hand. He smiled at Reeve.

A man was passing. But he passed smiling, for he knew that his daughter still had a man to love and care for her.

THE END

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# IN THE SADDLE

EVERY Sunday Brimstone Beals thundered from his little pulpit in the combination schoolhouse and church, there on the outskirts of Shallow Crossing. Everyone for miles around came in their stiff Sunday clothes to sit in the hard chairs and be denounced. They came by habit, and Brimstone Beals realized that, for Brimstone had known these men and women from the days when, as children, they had ridden into the crossing to attend his school. They came and sat stiffly there in front of him. Their ears rang with Faith and Hope and Charity. Then they rode away to go back to their fight with nature and with their fellow-men.

But Brimstone Beals carried on, and gained in wisdom. He began dropping in on the women folk when they met Thursday evenings in their little conclave that they called the "Ladies' Aid." He began talking in quiet tones. He began what he called "boring from within."

"The *Ladies' Aid?*" he said one night. "Who do you aid?"

And the ladies all sat around wondering, thinking to themselves that this had never occurred to them before. They had been coming into town every Thursday night for years to gossip and to sew and knit. Now and then they ran suppers to raise money for the leaking roof on the school-building or to buy new benches. But mostly they talked, and now they were silent, listening to Brimstone's soft words.

"Why, the school!" Ann Devine said. Ann was pretty young to be one of this lot. She had just taken to coming recently when Jack Long was ordered off her father's range by old Pete Devine. Jack Long was a nester. But he had had the nerve to think that he could court the daughter of Shallow Crossing's most important cattleman. "We bought some shingles for it," Ann went on. "We raised money for that new stove, too."

There was an excited buzz following her words. Of course! The Ladies' Aid did many fine things. What on earth did Brimstone mean? Was he only talking for the fun of causing excitement? Or did he have some deeper purpose?

"But what's a tight roof," Brimstone asked, "or a new stove, when your house is tumbling about you? What is the finest school house in the whole territory when war is rife from Piñon Mountain to the mouth of Shallow River?"

The Ladies' Aid was very silent then as the parson's words drifted into silence. A stick of wood settled in the new stove. Rain pattered on the tight roof. And through the night came the sound of gunfire, way off yonder on the banks of the Shallow River where John Long and half a dozen other homesteaders had reared their log huts and built their flimsy fences.

"While you women are meeting to waste your time in stoves and shingles, your men are killing," the parson went on. "Your men come to church on Sundays and hear of Faith and Hope and Charity.

But they go home to twist what they hear in the darkness of their minds. Faith in their gun-arms is the only faith they've got. Hope that they can beat their neighbors out of their land is their only hope. And they've left their Charity to the women-folk, who take it out in iron stoves. . . ."

These women were brave. But like their men they had become so used to Brimstone's thunder that they had not heard his warnings of war—a holocaust which he had prophesied ever since Pete Devine's first overt act in throwing John Long off his land.

Brimstone's voice hit a deep irony. "Off yonder the guns are booming. Men are killing. And you ladies, the guardians of Charity, should be there riding with your men, fighting with them, aiding them."

"Yes," Ann Devine's voice came huskily through the quiet. "Chasing out those"—the tone rose in scorn—"those nesters. Fighting with our men!"

Then Brimstone Beals' voice roared with the deep bellow of righteousness that had spread his fame through a whole territory.

"Fighting with your men, yes—but not for them! Fighting to protect those homesteaders! To show the true meaning of Charity. To aid your men to preserve their decency and honesty. For Charity is neighborliness. You wouldn't send a sick cowboy into the blizzard. Yet you'd drive whole families of women and children into despair because they, like you, are fighting for a living. . . ."

Ann's eyes were bright now with tears. Those nester women didn't come to the Ladies' Aid to gossip and sew and plan church suppers. But they came to church on Sundays. They came with their brightly-scrubbed children, with their poor, patched clothes, with their roughly dressed men who, in Charity, were working together against terrible odds for a common cause. Pitiful, yet brave. The true embodiment of Brimstone Beals' teaching.

And while the rain pattered on the new roof and the fire died in the shining stove, Brimstone Beals rode forth with an army of women, with the Ladies' Aid in buckboards and side-saddles into the war on the shores of Shallow River. That battle is still bright in the minds of the old timers out there. For the women brought Charity—and Peace—to their menfolk. The Ladies' Aid aided.

Someday one of *Dime Western's* authors will see the drama in that story and spin a yarn for his readers. Maybe he'll even meet up with one of those old timers who still remembers Brimstone Beals and his female army of Charity, and get the whole tale of that strife that might have wiped out the population of an entire valley. Maybe he'll meet up with Ann Devine who is now Ann Long, the white-haired wife of a man who was once her enemy. And the story that that author tells, like so many more in *Dime Western,* will be strong in those stirring, human qualities that turned the West from a wilderness to a golden land of Faith, and Hope—and Charity!

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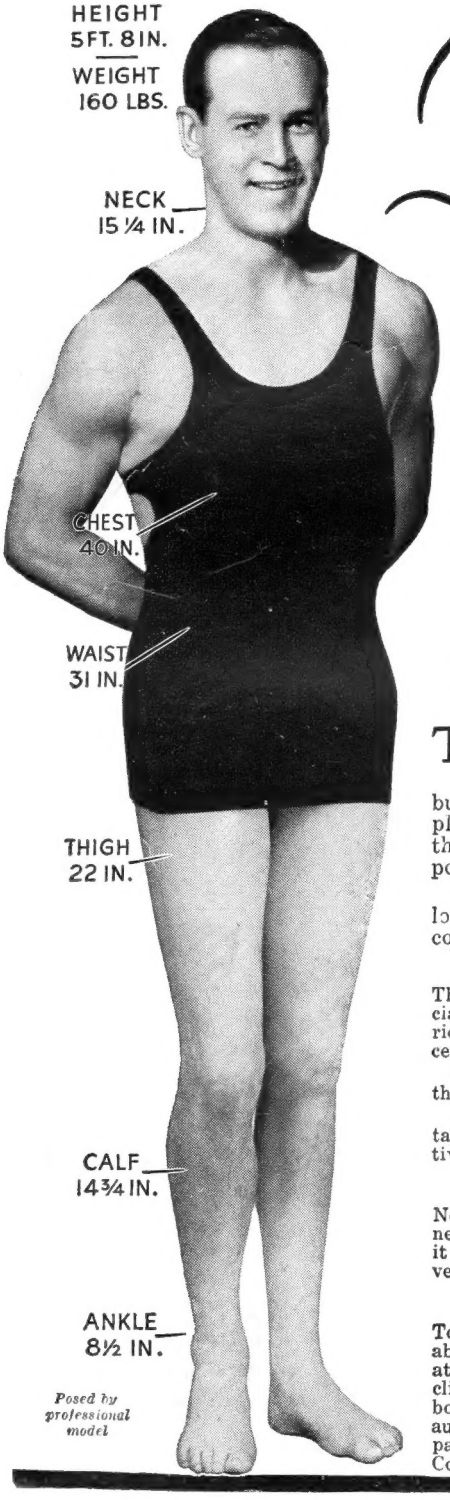


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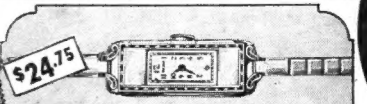


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